

BUDGET CASES
WE ROUND UP THE BEST!

TOTAL WAR: ATTILA
CAN CREATIVE ASSEMBLY SAVE ROME?

NVIDIA GTX 960
POWER ON A BUDGET



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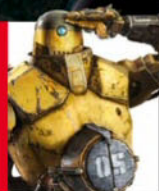
PC PowerPlay

HEROES OF THE STORM

CAN BLIZZARD'S "HERO BRAWLER" COMPETE IN THE CROWDED MOBA MARKET?

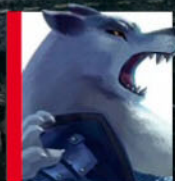
THE WITCHER 3: WILD HUNT

A supernatural menace and a missing lover haunt Geralt's final adventure



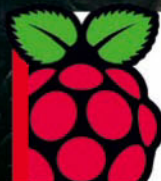
EVOLVE

FOUR HUNTERS AGAINST A SINGLE MONSTER. WHO WINS? READ THE REVIEW!



ARMELLO

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Hands on with the White Wolf's final adventure.



INTERVIEW: HEARTS OF IRON IV

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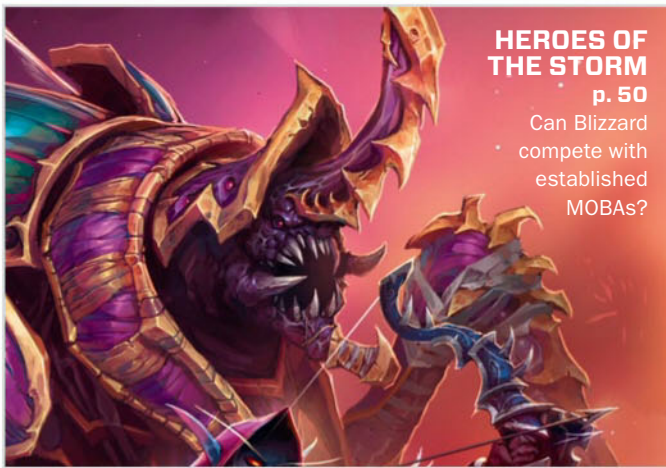
The future of WWII strategy.



HEROES OF THE STORM

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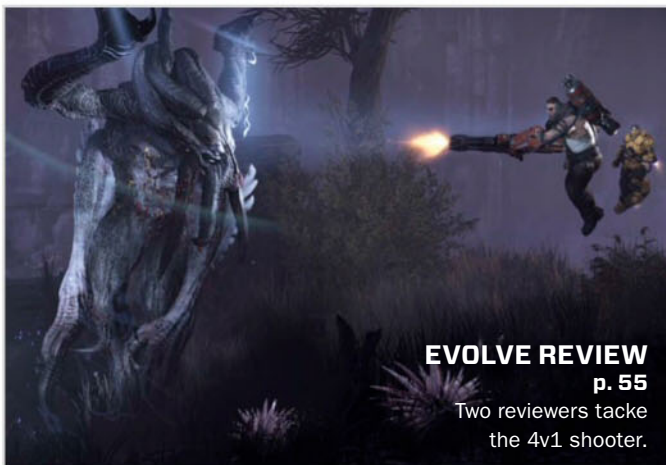
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compete with
established
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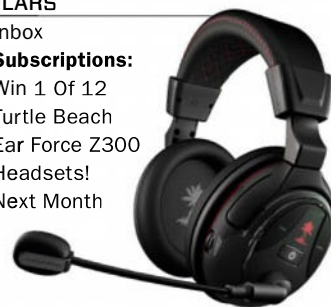
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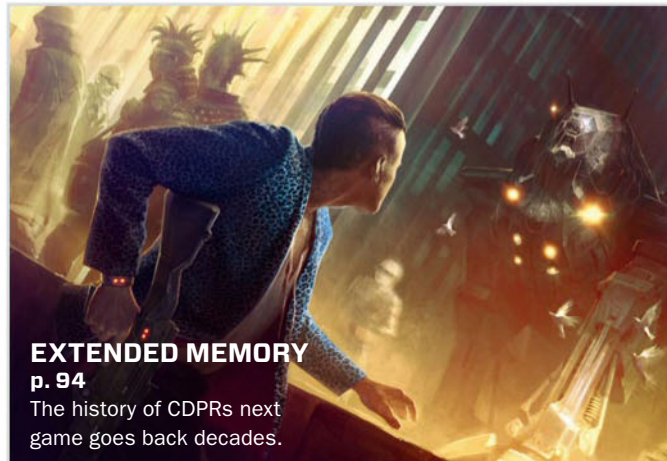
Great cases for
under \$200.



EXTENDED MEMORY

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The history of CDPRs next
game goes back decades.





Mea Culpa & Machinations

First off I need to make an apology. In the Sims Special issue (236) we made a joke, referring to Star Citizen as Scam Citizen. The joke was meant to be in reference to the multiple clickbait articles that referred to Star Citizen as a scam rather than implying that the game itself is a scam. It obviously didn't come across that way in print. To make it clear, we don't think Star Citizen is a scam. In fact, between Bennett Ring, Ben Mansill, David Hollingworth and myself we've actually contributed a not insignificant amount of money to the game. We're eagerly anticipating the full release just as much as you.

Now that's out of the way, let's talk about the future. We have some really big plans going forward to extend the PCPP brand in a number of ways. Within the next month or so we should have the first episode of the official PCPP podcast available for download. We still don't have a name as yet, so any suggestions you care to make are more than welcome (and you will be credited if we use your idea. We're also starting to put together let's play videos for the website. We really hope to bring a lot of early hands on footage to you in the coming year. We see the website and magazine as being complimentary, so plan on using the online space to deliver the kind of immediately accessible content that doesn't work in magazines, leaving the magazine free to do what it does best - well researched features, long form investigations, in depth tech and the like. We also have the first Upgrade Australia tech expo (on the same day this issue goes on sale). That should be a fun night.

What this means, aside from giving myself a hell of a lot more things to do in a month, is that we are planning on a hell of a lot more community interaction. More events, including early hands on sessions with upcoming games, have been planned for 2015, and the online space gives us lots of space to host your content, whether it be let's play videos, highlight reels of your best gaming moments, short films or animations, musical stings we can use in the podcast or what have you. We will have some more details of what kinds of things we'll be doing and how you can contribute in the next issue. It's an exciting time here in the PCPP bunker.

Anyway, enjoy the issue. It has a heap of good stuff in it, including a look at the origins of Let's Play (fortuitous, huh?), hands on with The Witcher 3, Pillars of Eternity and Heroes of the Storm, a bunch of reviews, swathes of opinion and all the other goodies you've come to expect. I'll metaphorically see you next month.

Daniel Wilks

Editor

@drwilkenstein

QUOTES OF THE MONTH

"I've got a noodle over here"

"You just harbour deep resentment full stop."

"I was trying to impart some backhand curve."

PC PowerPlay

EDITORIAL

EDITOR Daniel Wilks

dwilks@nextmedia.com.au

GROUP ART DIRECTOR Malcolm Campbell
mcampbell@nextmedia.com.au

TECH EDITOR Bennett Ring
bennett@internode.on.net

SENIOR EDITORIAL GURU Ben Mansill
bmansill@nextmedia.com.au

CONTRIBUTORS

James Cottle, Terrence Jarrod, Meghann O'Neill, Daniel Wilks, Josh Lundberg, Jordy Bertram, Theo, Morte, Nathan Lawrence, Dan Staines, Dave Kozicki, Joab Gilroy, John Gillyooly

ADVERTISING

GROUP NATIONAL ADVERTISING MANAGER

GAMING

Cameron Ferris

cferris@nextmedia.com.au

☎ (+16 2) 02 9901 6348

M: 0405 356 419

AGENCY ACCOUNT MANAGER

Kimberley Bloom

kbloom@nextmedia.com.au

☎ (+16 2) 02 9901 6367

M: 0414 098 837

ADVERTISING TRAFFIC

Alison Begg

abegg@nextmedia.com.au

☎ 02 9901 6346

PRODUCTION MANAGER Alison Begg

CIRCULATION DIRECTOR Carole Jones

SUBSCRIPTIONS

www.mymagazines.com.au

TOLL FREE ☎ 1300 361 146

Locked Bag 3355, St Leonards NSW 1590

COVER DISC ENQUIRIES:

jgillyooly@nextmedia.com.au

☎ 02 9901 6100

nextmedia

Building A, Level 6

207 Pacific Highway

St Leonards, NSW 2065

Locked Bag 5555,

St Leonards, NSW 1590

CHIEF EXECUTIVE OFFICER

David Gardiner

COMMERCIAL DIRECTOR

Bruce Duncan

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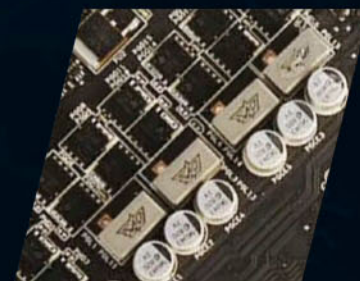
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THIS MONTH...



DANIEL WILKS
Fought with Telstra
[@drwilkenstein](#)



MALCOLM CAMPBELL
Read manga



BENNETT RING
Bought a motorcycle
[@bennettring](#)



JAMES COTTEE
Made a sweet nazi pun
[@j_cottee](#)



MEGHANN O'NEILL
Saved Cassandra
[@firkraags](#)



JAMES O'CONNOR
Moved house
[@jickle](#)



BEN MANSILL
Saw space magic



ROBERT NORTH
Got the MOBA bug



ANGUS BAILLIE
Localised pricings



DAVE KOZICKI
Live tweeted everything



DAVID HOLLINGWORTH
Razed Rome



CAMERON FERRIS
Got his tonsils out
[@pcpowerplay](#)

FRONTEND



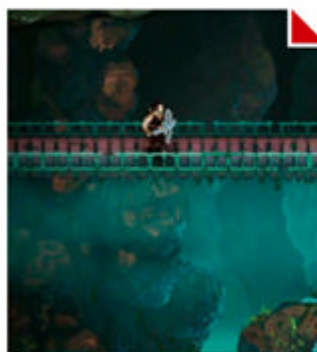
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A new leavel of realism brought to WWII strategy



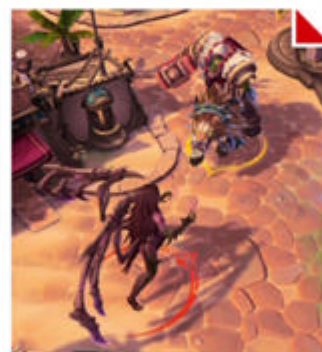
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Blizzard's Hero Brawler is accessible and fun

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LEGEND:



Steam



Origin



Good Old Games



uPlay



Download



Retail

MARCH

11TH

ORI AND THE
BLIND FOREST
MOON STUDIOS

19TH

BATTLEFIELD:
HARDLINE
VISCERAL

30TH

DEAD OR ALIVE:
THE LAST ROUND
TEAM NINJA



TBA



ARMELLO
LEAGUE OF GEEKS



APRIL

2ND

PROJECT CARS
SLIGHTLY MAD
STUDIOS

7TH

DARK SOULS II:
SCHOLAR OF THE
FIRST SIN
FROM SOFTWARE

9TH

STAR DRIVE 2
ICEBERG
INTERACTIVE

14TH

MORTAL
KOMBAT X
NETHERREALM
STUDIOS

14TH

GRAND THEFT
AUTO V
ROCKSTAR



TBA



GALACTIC
CIVILIZATIONS
III
STARDOCK



MAY

15TH

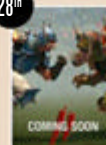
STARLIGHT
DRIFTER
AJILLEY

19TH

THE WITCHER 3:
WILD HUNT
CD PROJEKT RED

26TH

MAGICKA 2
PARADOX
INTERACTIVE

28TH

BLOOD BOWL 2
CYANIDE



JUNE

3RD

BATMAN:
ARKHAM KNIGHT
ROCKSTEADY



2015



HYPER LIGHT
DRIFTER
HEART MACHINE



TOM CLANCY'S
RAINBOW SIX:
SIEGE
UBISOFT MONTREAL



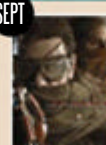
SEPT



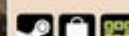
ROCKET RANGER
RELOADED
CINEMAWARE



SEPT



METAL GEAR
SOLID 5
KONAMI





LETTER OF THE MONTH WINS!

Write in to PCPP with your rants, considered opinions, and endless run-on sentences of pure awesome. The address is letters@pcpowerplay.com.au. Each letter read by hand! This Letter of the Month winner scores himself a copy of Total War: Attila!



LETTER OF THE MONTH

GRUNTLED

Being a PCPP subscriber I look forward to spotting each months issue in my letter box. It always puts a smile on my face and I usually eagerly strip off the plastic sleeve and do a quick skim through of your mag right at my letter box before even making back to my house.

I confess to being pretty disappointed with last month's issue! (PCPP #236) While I appreciate the work that went into it there was nothing in it at all of interest for a non-sim fan. Even after a second more thorough pass through that issue went straight onto my PCPP pile pretty much unread leaving me feeling disgruntled.

Maybe next time you do a focused 'feature' style issue mix in a few articles or game reviews that are not so focussed on the theme to keep it balanced and interesting to readers who are not into whatever the feature theme is.

Fast forward to the March issue (PCPP #237) and I would have to say this last PCPP issue was one of the best I've read! Thank you! I loved the 'game of the year' and 'tech of the year' articles, the awesome Warhammer features (who doesn't love anything Warhammer?) and brilliant game

reviews. My faith has been restored.

Keep up the good work.

Simon Lenz

Hi Simon – the Sim Special was the first (non tech) issue we've done entirely dedicated to one theme. It was something of an experiment to test the waters for future specials and also intended as an issue that could comfortably sit on stands over the notoriously slow December/January period. We will probably run another special around the same time this year but we'll probably go for something that is less limiting, like a Games of the Future special, or look at a theme like science fiction or fantasy rather than a specific genre.

2014

Well the call has gone out from the current editor about how is PC Powerplay is going?

And you know what?

I think you are going well. The articles have been good, the game reviews have been current and i like the photos you choose to put in the magazine.

2014 was a good year for PC gaming. I was gaming through the year and never went one week without something to play.

And it helps a PC games magazine when you do have something to talk about.

And going through your games of the year article reinforced what a good year it was.

NYE is well over now and I look forward to more games and more issues of PC POWERPLAY.

Keep up the good work and those standards.

Regards,

Mitchell Hall

Hiya Mitchell. 2014 was an interesting year for games. There was a lot of quality titles spread throughout the year making it a pretty much constant joy. What was truly interesting about 2014 was that it didn't have as many of the big highs or lows that most years feature.

> FEEDBACK #237

> Arkayn: I like the issue. I am happy so far with Wilkie considering he only just stepped in.

> dingbat: My only real gripe is not enough reviews. Way back there would be at the minimum six reviews. Perhaps it is because I write movie reviews like I'm being paid for it, but I love it when I buy a movie rag and there are 20+ plus movies to read about. Its hardly like there are less games out there than movies. Hell I have to be careful on steam with indie games, they are cheap... until you've bought six all at once! There is so much stuff out there waiting to be written about... Hell I might switch from movies to video-game reviews.

I agree that for a new editor the mag is looking nice. I'm a huge fan of the indie section and like I said I think it'd be great for everyone if that section is expanded on.

> Sarge13: I really Enjoyed reading this issue keep up the good work guys, Except those articles that turn out to be advertorial articles 1 of those fluffers got me lol :)

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BRENT AGE 27 | BRISBANE, QLD

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2. Intel i7 4790k 4.00GHz
3. 7 x Corsair Fans (Extreme colour scheme)
4. Corsair H60 Water Cooler

LAST UPGRADE: Corsair H60 Water Cooler

DREAM UPGRADE: 4k screen so i can see what all the fuss is about ! Gaming Mouse or keyboard. Anything to do away with my old alien junk.

FAVOURITE FEATURE: Dare we say the ORANGE colour scheme?

WHY SO SPECIAL?: My first build ever!!! My wicked colour scheme. not to many orange sytems out there.

BRENT WINS!

Thanks Corsair we have a K70 mechanical keyboard and Sabre gaming mouse for Brent. Enjoy!

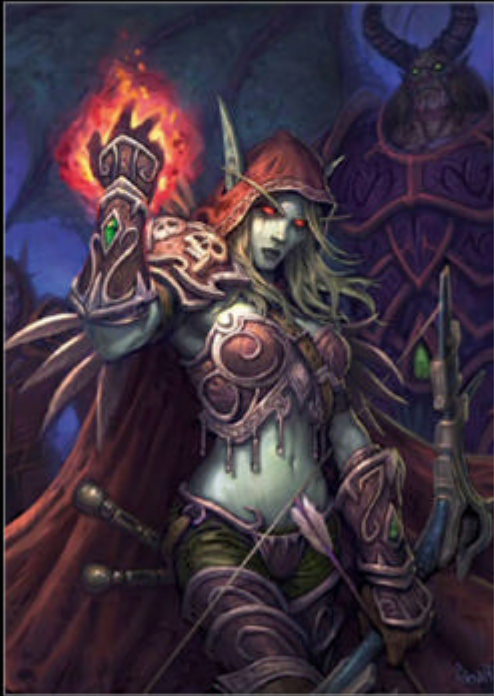


1. So much orange!
2. Even more psychedelically swirly orange!
3. I think we're seeing a pattern here. We can only assume that Brent was raised in the forest by a bushel of wild oranges and he is now paying tribute to his tribe. (Seriously though, it looks great.)
4. Ha! Your new mouse is black, not orange. PCPP is destroying your desk colour scheme!
5. Always good to see a bit of sucking up in a My PC photo.
6. Brent's surround sound setup seems a little cramped.

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PCPP GAME & TECH NEWS



Blizzard introduces WoW Tokens for in-game gold-trading

But it's not about real money - kinda.

Gold trading has always been a thorn under Blizzard's troll-hide, whether it be the in-game economy getting skewed by farmers, or the presence of farming bots themselves. The new WoW Token may not fix those issues, but it's an interesting move to let people get in on some light trading themselves.

The WoW Token will launch in an upcoming patch, and it's an in-game item that lets you, well, trade gold. Not for cash, though, but rather for in-game time.

Economics in the real world is bad enough, but it looks like I go a little cross-eyed for game economics as

well, but I'll try to explain it.

You can buy a WoW Token through the in-game shop for real dollars, and then sell that Token on the Auction House for a set-in-stone price. Folks can then buy a WoW Token using gold, and then exchange that for game-time.

The idea is to help players with massive gold hordes the ability to buy game time with pretend, in-game gold.

There's a complete FAQ on Battle.net (<http://us.battle.net/wow/en/blog/18141101/introducing-the-wow-token-3-2-2015>), and if you've a tonne of cash in your WoW account, you'll likely want to check it out.



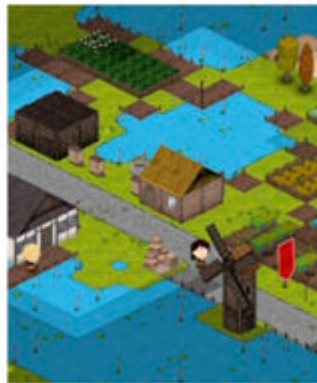
Aussie game Towncraft out now on Steam

New game makes the move from mobile to PC with style.

It's not often - if ever - that hear the term "chill-out crafting and city-building game", but that's exactly what the team at Flat Earth Games have built, with Towncraft. Released for the iPad back in 2013, Towncraft is out now on Steam, alongside Flat Earth's second game, Metrocide.

It's pretty much a classic city-building game, but much more slower-paced and relaxed. It's cartoonish, retro graphics hark back to an older period of PC gaming.

"The idea at the outset was to create the kind of in-depth simulation game for iPad that I enjoyed on PC," said Rohan Harris, co-founder of Flat Earth Games. "The processing power was there, and it bothered me that I couldn't play the kind of complex games that I wanted



on the device. After it went well, and since it was created in the image of desktop games, moving to desktop was the next logical choice!"

The game's out now on Steam, and will be coming to the Humble Store, Greenman Gaming, and Gamers Gate (man, do I feel sorry for those guys) shortly.



Grand Theft Auto V for PC delayed until April

But Online Heists will be there at day one.

Well, it was meant to be next month, but it turns out getting everything shiny and ready to rob in Grand Theft Auto for PC is a bit harder than expected - the game's now been pushed back to April 14 for its launch.

Rockstar's saying that they're working hard on the Online experience of the game, which is

probably fair. For a lot of people who've already played it on console (raises hand), getting into GTA Online will be first thing they want to do on PC.

Thankfully, Rockstar's being generous. If you've pre-ordered, you'll find \$200,000 in your Online bank account, which will certainly make for a better start to the game.



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HEADSETS

PCPP GAME & TECH NEWS

Bethesda announces announcement event for E3

Fallout 4? Dishonoured 2? Whatever it is, Bethesda must have some big news this year.

Bethesda Softworks, the brand behind such epic games as Skyrim, Fallout, and Dishonored, has announced that it's going big for this year's Electronic Entertainment Expo, and will be hosting a day-zero press event.

Every year, on the day before E3 starts, big publishers like Ubisoft, Sony, and Microsoft, host singular events to launch their big name titles. It helps cut through the buzz of the three days of E3, getting out brand and platform messages in a period of relatively clear air. So if Bethesda's ponying up for dedicated event - live, on stage, with guest talent and demos, in front of a packed



audience of journos and industry types, the company must feel it's on to something.

There's a few things that are likely on the radar. The Doom reboot is the obvious contender, and we can even dream about a possible Fallout 4. Speaking of prayers, even though it was cancelled last year, I still pray that Prey 2 might get a miraculous second life, because after seeing it at E3 a few years back, it really did look stunning.

It's also been a couple of years now since Arkane's Dishonored, and that makes perfect sense for development into a franchise. Which could easily happen with Wolfenstein, too, given that game's popularity. Hell, Bethesda may even be planning on surprising everyone with a wholly new IP - that would certainly justify such an event.

Regardless, we'll hopefully have some reports when E3 rolls around in June.

Gaming and the environment - together at last!

Riot Games will be building an artificial reef in the shape of a League of Legends character

I may have missed Riot Games' Ocean Week challenge when it kicked off a couple of weeks ago, but I'm at least glad to have caught up with it now that it's over. Not because I'm a rabid League of Legends player - MOBAs really do confuse and alarm me - but because the end goal of the campaign is really rather neat.

Riot will be building an artificial reef, in collaboration with marine biologists. That's neat.

Ocean Week built up steadily, through countless LoL matches, to build up a series of rewards for players, each unlocked as more and more games were played. Obviously, it was a campaign to increase play time, but the end 'stretch goal' - the artificial reef - was an inspired piece of thinking.

When that was unlocked, any player that had earned enough points during the promotion was

able to vote on which character would be immortalised in moist splendour - the final winner was, appropriately, Nautilus - the Titan of the Depths.

Well played, LoL players. Well played.

The construction of the reef is waiting upon an approvals process, after which the best location in Australia will be found.



ASRock



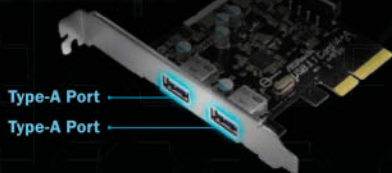
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THE
PICTURE **BIG**

Bombshell

DEVELOPER INTERCEPTOR ENTERTAINMENT
PUBLISHER 3D REALMS
DUE 2015
www.bombshell.com

It's been a long while since a game asked us if we were tough enough to save the president. Enter Shelly "Bombshell" Harrison, a former bomb disposal technician turned mercenary. Armed with a variety of guns, a moddable cybernetic arm and an extensive skill tree, Shelly must might her way through hordes of robotic enemies in this rather exciting looking new action RPG.



THE MISSING FLOPPIES

Which will ship first: *Star Control* or *Godus*? We've purchased a ticket on the Hype Train to find out...

Stardock is all over the news. Four years ago founder and CEO Brad Wardell decided that his company had too many irons in too many fires, and so he sold off his digital distribution platform, Impulse. Rather than, say, buy a L.A. mansion with a candy room, he instead chose to invest this windfall back into the community, backing a constellation of new satellite studios. Those space seeds are now bearing fruit.

The good news: Stardock is now projecting the launch of at least four major new games a year for the foreseeable future. If they're all as good as *Offworld Trading Company*, that's very good news indeed. The bad news: the new *Star Control* isn't launching until 2017.

I have many fond memories of *Star Control 2*: tooling around the universe in an absurd art deco mothership, parleying with smack-talking aliens, selling my crew into slavery... all to a rocking .MOD file soundtrack reminiscent of a slick Amiga demo. Above all, *Star Control* was a game of duelling, which is something you rarely see.

Fighting games aren't quite the same thing. You prance around for a minute or two, belting someone until his arbitrary 'health bar' reaches zero, but it's very rare that a game like *Nidhogg* or *Bushido Blade* comes along that captures how a duel should feel. *Star Control* nailed it, yet going by some of the forum comments there is a danger that the devs in charge of the new one might forget that its core genius was ripping off *Spacewar*, and that the exploration and trading and ship customisation were just space icing on the space cake.

Brad Wardell admits openly that his greatest enemy is his own cognitive dissonance, and on more than one occasion it's brought his company to the brink. If you

have an hour to spare, I strongly recommend listening to Binpress Podcast #24, in which Mr. Wardell is amazingly frank about his blunders, and what he's learned from them. There are some fascinating insights into how he built his business, too. Every so often someone with deep pockets comes along offering to buy part or all of Stardock, but because the operation is entirely self-funded, Mr. Wardell always declines. He doesn't need the money!

Will the new *Star Control* be a worthy successor to the works of Fred Ford and Paul Reiche III? Whatever happens, past experience would suggest we can expect nothing but cheerful honesty from Wardell and his crew. If only the same could be

“parleying with smack-talking aliens, selling my crew into slavery...”

said for that tragic, falling star of game development, Peter Molyneux.

If you'd like to watch 17 minutes of the most awkward content on YouTube, go to the 22cans channel and check out the *Godus* Community Update from February 9, in which Mr. Molyneux attempts to explain why he's scaled back the *Godus* development team to free up staff for a fruity new project, and why his Kickstarter backers will get what they paid for very late, if at all. Two years into development, and he's still trying to 'find the game that *Godus* should be'.

Beside him sits the new lead dev of *Godus*, Konrad Naszynski, and he clearly doesn't want to be there. His grim countenance is a picture that speaks more than a thousand weasel words.

As for Molyneux, his delivery is stale, and he makes some baffling grammatical errors as he points out that he's never run a Kickstarter before, and that really, this could've happened to anyone. "Hindsight is 20/20... I apologise to everyone for the mistakes that I've made... I wish I was someone who didn't make mistakes, and I think I have to learn from those mistakes." This line of rhetoric is intended to make the viewer think: 'Aw, shucks, I make mistakes too! I have no choice but to forgive him!' yet after 30-odd years of game development, you would think that a man might have made every project management mistake there is, and learned from all of them. If someone is still making

catastrophic blunders after that much experience, then maybe, just maybe, he has no right to expect people to pay for his games in advance. With Peter, it's always been about the hype, and now he's created a business model where his paying customers get hype, and nothing else.

It's a tragedy, really, because no sooner than he perfected the shell game he's been practising since the 1980s, he had a big sook in the pages of *The Guardian*: "I think people are just sick of hearing from me. They've been sick of hearing from me for so many years now. You know, we're done."

Oh, but we're not done, Peter. Once a laughing stock, always a 'LOLcow' – and your disgruntled fans will be milking your rubbery words for the rest of your life... 🐄



JAMES COTTEY requested first class seats on the hype train but PCPP only has the budget for economy.

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BACK TO THE FÜHRER



WHO DAN LIND
WHERE PARADOX
WHY HEARTS OF IRON IV



With Hearts of Iron 4 due to blitz on to Steam any month now, we talked to producer **DAN LIND** about how fan feedback inspired a complete rework of the games interface, and how its new mechanics can uncannily mimic some iconic WWII movies...

In their efforts to balance realism with playability, the game makers at Paradox have hit upon a novel system for affecting how tightly players can grip the reins of power in Hearts of Iron 4. As producer Dan Lind explained to us, this system is called 'Political Power.' Though the denizens of the notorious image board 4chan call it something else: Fuhrer Mana.

"[Laughs]. Yeah, although we should probably not call it that [more laughter]." To give an example of how it works in-game, Dan recalled Hitler's precarious political position in the early days of WWII.

"Germany is on the warpath. And France and the United Kingdom are extremely tired of war after World War I. And Germany is supposed to not have a military at this time. But they did build a military; nobody stopped them. They remilitarised the Rhineland, which is the border of France, where they weren't allowed to actually have any troops. And nobody stopped them. And they started claiming land, which they managed to get politically, not actually through war. Until they pissed off the other countries enough to start the war. But during this time people thought Hitler was basically crazy, and people were just going to stop him.

"But nothing happened,

so people actually started believing what he said. Because he could prove it. He'd say: 'Oh, I'm going to say this, and they're not going to stop me.' In game terms, if you can pull this sort of thing off you get something called 'Political Power', and that means that you can control the cabinet, you can control industries, to do your bidding." This translates into specific bonuses, depending on which historical figures have faith in you.

A major breakthrough being introduced with Hearts of Iron

also been completely re-worked; to the best of his knowledge, Dan is sure that no other strategy game has implemented air combat in this manner: a high level simulation system, where most of the input is through control of your industries, and trying to feed your air force war machine.

"The way it works is that we have the world divided into zones. Fairly large zones, so that there's actually a hierarchy of zones. The smallest areas we call provinces, and they affect troop movements. Above those there's something called 'states,' which is a group of provinces, where you can build buildings and stuff like that. And they have names, and such. And where you have cities. And then above that we have

of planes you'll be using in these zones. You have fighters that shoot down other planes, basically, and control the skies. Bombers; and there's both smaller bombers for more tactical targeting and strategic bombers for laying waste to enemy factories and such. And then there's support planes, which is close air support; airplanes that go directly in and help your guys on the ground in fights."

There are limits to the granularity of this system, however; you're not going to be able to play as the UK and re-enact the events of The Dambusters. "We have three different types of industry: military industry, civilian industry, and naval industry. If you have enough intel you'll be able to see in a state what kind of stuff is being built there, and make sure that you target those areas. You can't specifically say 'target a factory building Tiger tanks.' But you can target so that you're going to be going for an area with a lot of military industries; you know that you're going to be hurting their tank production."

After fans complained about the naval combat in Hearts of Iron 3, Dan and his team did a major rethink on how to handle the war at sea. "What we have created is a system a little bit like what I explained with the aircraft, in that they work in zones. So when you have a fleet, you can decide how spread out it should be. Say you're trying to hunt down submarines, you want to spread out your fleet, and

“the denizens of the notorious image board 4chan call it something else: Fuhrer Mana.”

4 is the new planning system. Rather than micro-managing the movement of every single unit, you can create invasion plans that manifest as big arrows on the map, just like the graphics in classic war documentaries.

"It's a way of controlling a large amount of units easily, and being able to set up the plan before the actual battle takes place, so that when shit hits the fan you can just go: 'Execute' and worry about the little bits where you need to worry, and not the grand plan, at the same time."

Strategic air warfare has

the strategic regions, which is where you're going to be fighting your air battles. Poland contains three different air zones at the moment. And what you do is you assign the type and number of aircraft you want to be there, and give them different missions."

Once these orders are in place, it all plays out as a simulation. While you're doing other things you'll see airplanes buzzing about, autonomously trying to fulfil their missions to shoot down enemy bombers and support aircraft.

"There's three main types

try and hunt them, right? Or if you're submarines, you want to spread out and try and find the convoys. And then, when you find the convoys, assuming you have the proper training and doctrines, you want to call in your other submarine friends and then you all group up and attack together so you can sink the maximum amount. The Germans call these 'Wolf Packs.'

"So we wanted to let you do these, as well as do the stuff that Germany did early on, which is have, say, a couple of fairly fast, armoured ships just run around solo and cause a lot of havoc. Because, you know, the ocean is a big place, and it's kind of hard to find someone. But if the danger is there, if they might find your convoys, you're going to have to spread out your entire Royal Navy, as the UK, to guard against them."

Thus the game engine is built so that players can recreate the naval antics as depicted in 'Sink the Bismarck.' "Germany might not have been much of a naval power in previous games. So people ended up not really bothering to build up navies. Whereas now you can build a little bit of a navy and that can still be quite efficient if you're teaming up with Italy. If you can hold off a lot of the Royal Navy with your shenanigans, that will keep them from putting pressure on Italy and screwing with them in the Mediterranean."

The opaque supply system in Hearts of Iron 3 also attracted a lot of criticism, and has been completely reworked with a more

transparent, user-friendly interface. The new system of Division Templates lets you allocate resources such as armour and anti-tank guns right down to the battalion level, leaving plenty of scope in the meta-game to out-think your opponents' force mix choices; it also lets you change the mix in existing units. The tech trees, or 'Doctrines', now more closely model nations' weaknesses, as well as their strengths. "Germany, for example, is very powerful early on, because a lot of the other nations are not really used to dealing with a fast-moving enemy. But it's weak on the defence, and fairly expensive, because it relies on having a lot of armour."

After talking to Dan for over half an hour, it felt like we'd barely scratched the surface. So out of all the myriad upgrades in the new Hearts of Iron, what new feature has he been enjoying the most? "I'm kind of liking at the moment using marines and naval invasions. We've got a new invasion system that runs through the planning systems, so that you can more easily prepare a large invasion. I've been having fun trying to invade the United Kingdom. With Italian marine soldiers. That's pretty fun."

"Other than that, it's always great dropping a nuke on someone!"

Hearts of Iron 4 is due to launch on Steam in Q2 of 2015. **JAMES COTTEE PC**





CRUSH YOU TO GOO

Drop the difficulty? I'd rather die, at least in ways related to lack of skill, if not bugs.

Dragon Age is a series I know very well. I played Origins, reviewed Dragon Age 2 and read all the books/comics. Being a "fixer" rather than a "complainer," when DA2 had no item descriptions, I wrote unofficial versions myself, to the tune of 23,000 words. I penned (not sexy) fan fiction, placed in a BioWare creative writing challenge and I made a standalone module for Origins about a traveling troupe of demons performing terrifying plays in the minds of magic users.

Yes, I'm fanatical. No, PCPP didn't ask me to review Dragon Age: Inquisition. I'm cool with that. I couldn't do it objectively now, anyway, and reviewing massive RPGs doesn't pay well per hour, trust me. Not enough disclosure, yet? I also became good friends with a Dragon Age designer through modding and common interests; games. But you still want to hear my detailed critique of Inquisition's combat, right?

Relatively few play on Nightmare and exclusively so. In Inquisition, this mode is described as, "for masochists and the truly mad." I enjoy it. It's not impossible. It is also marginally easier than in Dragon Age 2, as long as you keep an eye on level scaling. This difficulty, however, reveals aspects of the combat systems, interface and implementation (specifically for PC) that are detracting from my enjoyment of the game, even if most players won't notice or care.

When you're fighting for every level and new ability, relying on combat's supportive systems, like crafting, is essential. Encounter design, loot drops and alternatives to combat, like "stealth," are something you must consider carefully, too. Even an understanding of the way levels and quests are structured can keep you alive. But, let's start at the beginning. This should be a short enough tale, as I've only made it to level seven, so far.

One of the most difficult sections on Nightmare, hilariously, is the tutorial. Before you are allowed to control Cassandra, her behaviours constantly put her in mortal danger. When she dies, the game ends. I quickly realised there was nothing I could do to stop her drinking the eight healing potions and engaging the enemy, so I developed quite specific, "Cassandra protection strategies," which most certainly involved stunning her.

Conversely, the game then introduces invincible friendlies at every quest related choke point I've seen, thus far. Many a battle have I triggered only to watch, bored, as the blue ringed Templars dispose of enemies, rather than take damage myself. After all, on

heralded their large attacks. The small ones were harder to dodge, due to them switching hands or styles. And, cross-class combos provided really meaningful opportunities for tactical play, especially at higher levels, while groups of enemies were diverse.

What Inquisition does well, however, is what I initially thought of as an "anti-combo." If an enemy is frozen, hitting them with an "impact detonator" will shatter, but not in the way that would kill instantly, like in Origins, but allow them to move again. This combo does deal hefty damage, so it's a trade-off between crowd control and timing. At higher levels, the really powerful effects are accessed with the correct detonator per state.

Then, there are the blocking moves, like Shield Wall or Block and Slash, which allow for both warrior types to take no damage from one non-flanking enemy. In

“I penned (not sexy) fan fiction, placed in a BioWare creative writing challenge”

Nightmare and at low level, each character will be murdered in two hits. Unless you've collected a million elfroot to upgrade your potions already, you need a potion per hit and have to preserve eight.

As they've allowed a friendly fire toggle for the first time, use Shield Bash with The Iron Bull a step too close to the party and end the game immediately. I'm not absolutely positive of this, because Inquisition also suffers from a lack of documentation, but I haven't seen enemies damaging each other. This was one of the things I most enjoyed about combat in DA2; luring darkspawn into the ogre's path before a charge, then backflipping to safety.

In fact, as unpopular an opinion as this might be, my favourite combat so far in the series was in DA2's Legacy expansion. Hostile creatures damaged each other while sometimes trying to avoid doing so and

combination with Challenge and HP boosting abilities, like Barrier, the melee portion of your party is now really fun to play. Inquisition's combat, in isolation, is changed for both better and worse, in my current opinion.

I love Dragon Age, for its story, inclusiveness and combat, but when your party starts climbing imaginary ladders to shoot elevated enemies, it's time to wait for a patch. Unfortunately, a patch won't fix the massive levels you have to traverse just to get to the next, identical rift encounter. Or the ceiling and wall collisions you have to wrestle the camera around. Will I finish it? Probably. Eventually. I'll let you know if the Nightmare achievement is bugged. That would be hilarious. 🚩



MEGHANN O'NEILL *hasn't got a mount. What's the point, if your Bog Unicorn doesn't have some kind of Sticky Snot AoE ability?*



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10 TO WATCH



WAR FOR THE OVERWORLD

DEVELOPER SUBTERRANEAN GAMES
PUBLISHER SUBTERRANEAN GAMES
DUE APRIL 2
wftogame.com

For those who were deeply disappointed by the cancellation of Dungeon Keeper 3 almost 15 years ago – and again in 2013 by the appalling Dungeon Keeper Mobile – War of the Overworld is a dungeon management, real-time strategy, god game that hopes to fill the Dungeon Keeper shaped void left in our hearts. DK creator Peter Molyneux himself praised Subterranean Games for the passion they have shown in making the game.



CUPHEAD

DEVELOPER STUDIO MDHR
PUBLISHER STUDIO MDHR
DUE 2015
www.cupheadgame.com

The visual style of Cuphead is unique enough to make it instantly stand out. Few games have successfully replicated the style of 1930s animations like those of Fleischer Studios or Disney. Cuphead aims to channel the difficulty of retro games, so the developers are obsessed with ensuring that the hit boxes and battle animations are just right. The devs are also attempting to break the Guinness world record for number of boss battles in a Run and Gun game. That's pretty awesome.

VOLUME

DEVELOPER MIKE BITHELL
PUBLISHER MIKE BITHELL
DUE 2015
www.mikebithellgames.com/volume/

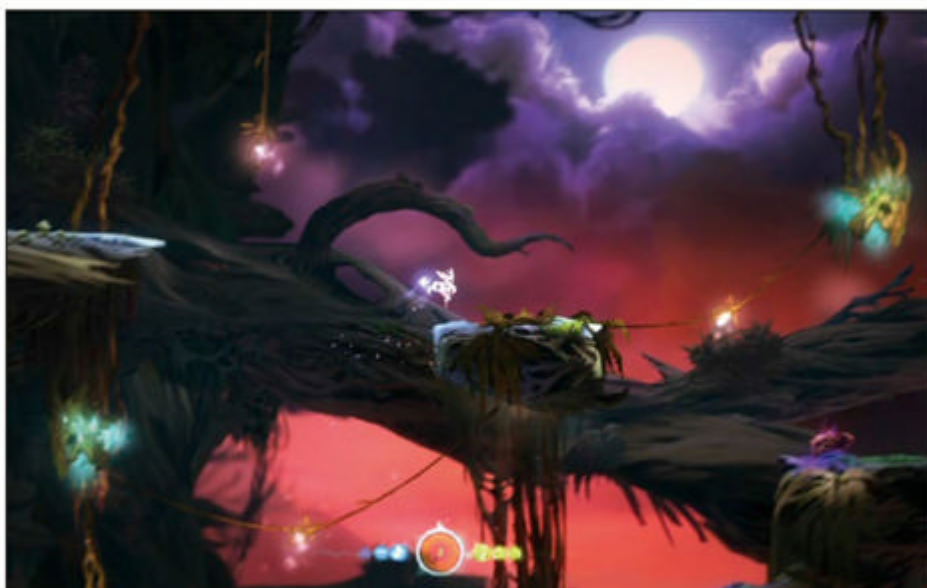
Thomas Was Alone creator Mike Bithell has been working on a new game called Volume. In terms of complexity Volume seems much more ambitious than the simple, geometric puzzle-platform game that was Thomas Was Alone. In fact just about the only similarity between this 3D stealth game and Bithell's previous game is the clever use of voice narration. Featuring the ability to remix and share levels with other players, in the words of Bithell himself, Volume "will likely be a pretty good game."



ORI AND THE BLIND FOREST

DEVELOPER MOON STUDIOS
PUBLISHER MICROSOFT STUDIOS
DUE MARCH 11
www.oribindforest.com

Ori and the Blind Forest is shaping up to be one of the most visually charming Metroidvania games we have ever seen. Little has been revealed about the story so far, but we do know that players will be controlling Ori and a companion called Sein, who assists both in combat and direction. Ori was orphaned as a child and adopted by an adorable, yeti-like creature - so you can bet there will be some heartstrings being tugged here one way or another.



THE WITNESS

DEVELOPER THEKLA, INC.
PUBLISHER THEKLA, INC.
DUE 2015
the-witness.net

The Witness is a first person puzzle adventure game from the mind of Jonathan Blow, the creator of the 2008 indie hit Braid. The Witness is set on an island that is broken up into ten distinct areas, each with its own set of puzzles and mazes built around a central theme. The goal is to solve these puzzles to gain access to the mountain in the middle. The ideas described in The Witness sound simple, subtle and deeply thought out – something that should sound quite familiar to those of us who played Braid.

NO MAN'S SKY

DEVELOPER HELLO GAMES
PUBLISHER HELLO GAMES
DUE 2015
no-mans-sky.com

Set in a procedurally generated universe, No Man's Sky will allow players to explore an entire planet and then hop aboard your space ship to explore an entirely new one with unique life, landscapes and atmospheric conditions. The game boasts that every star you see in the sky will be a sun that you can travel to, with its own solar system of planets to land on and investigate. How this entire universe is explored is up to the player, but each planet and voyage will present new challenges and dangers as well as resources for upgrading your ship or suit.



DARK SOULS II: SCHOLAR OF THE FIRST SIN

DEVELOPER FROM SOFTWARE
PUBLISHER BANDAI NAMCO GAMES
DUE MARCH 11
www.darksoulsii.com

We have absolutely loved both the Dark Souls games and have played through them both multiple times. As far as we're concerned Dark Souls II has set the new benchmark for action RPGs and the opportunity to play through the game again with new item and enemy placements as well as updates to the graphics, performance and audio is enough to get us excited all over again. Is there such a thing as too much Dark Souls? PCPP looks forward to answering this question.



SUPERHOT

DEVELOPER SUPERHOT TEAM
PUBLISHER SUPERHOT TEAM
DUE JUNE 2015
superhotgame.com

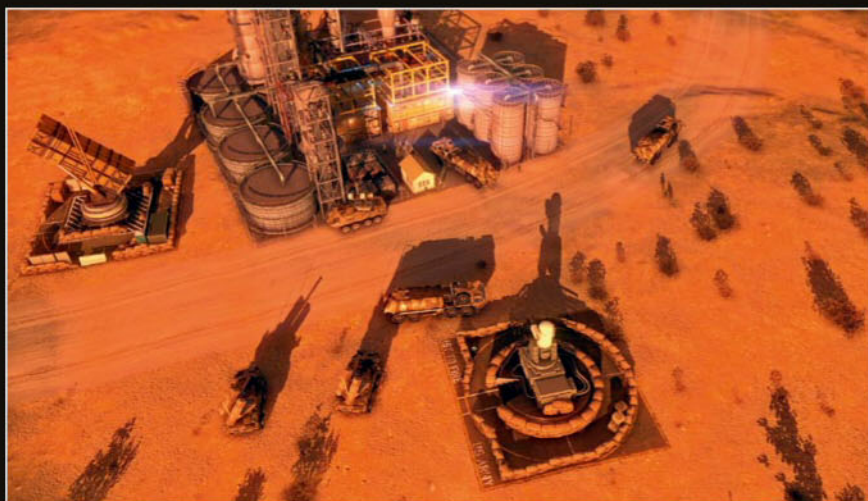
SUPERHOT certainly sounds intriguing. It's a challenging first person shooter with limited ammunition and the very real chance of being killed instantly by a single enemy gunshot, but the player can also manipulate the flow of time. Blurring the line between FPS and strategy game, SUPERHOT has an interesting core mechanic where time only travels at normal speeds as the player character moves. This means you can stop still to slow down time, assess the situation and plan an appropriate course of action. It even allows you to see incoming bullets moving through the air towards you.

MIGHTY NO. 9

DEVELOPER CONCEPT
PUBLISHER CONCEPT
DUE Q2 2015
www.mightyno9.com

Flying in the face of Capcom and their poor use of the Mega Man license, Mighty No. 9 is a Mega Man game in everything other than name. It will feature levels that can be completed in any order, with a boss at the end who will give the player access to a new ability. This action-platformer is even being produced by Mega Man creator Keiji Inafune, which helped ensure that the game would meet its minimum Kickstarter goal in just two days. With Inafune on board and all the familiar trappings of a Mega Man game there's a lot for eager Mega Man fans to get excited about here.





ACT OF AGGRESSION

DEVELOPER EUGEN SYSTEMS
PUBLISHER FOCUS HOME INTERACTIVE
DUE MAY 2015
www.actofaggression-game.com

Act of Aggression is set in the not-too-distant future with RTS gameplay from the not-too-distant past. Hoping to hearken back to a golden era of traditional real-time strategy, Act of Aggression puts players in control of UN and US forces in a time of a global economic crisis, to suppress the growth of a shadowy military organisation. There will be all the resource gathering and base building that gamers will always associate with the classic RTS formula, with twists like the inclusion of superweapons and anti-superweapons and an emphasis on upgrading existing units rather than building new ones in order to manage the sparse resources on each map. There will be two separate singleplayer campaigns and multiplayer matches that will support up to 40 players at a time – which sounds like it could be great for excitement and tension building as you wait to see who will make the first move.





GODUS SCHMODUS

Applying scorched Earth to one's self.

Everyone who wants to be a famous game developer stand up. Great, that's almost everyone. Now, everyone who wants to be Peter Molyneux stay standing, all others be seated. Right. Thought so. Now stand up again if you'd rather enjoy the reputation and public adoration of, say Richard Nixon, than Peter Molyneux?

Oh my. What a disaster. What a total destruction of a man we have witnessed, what an embarrassment we have vicariously endured, and left feeling for the poor souls trapped on the dev team building Godus. With no greater sympathy than that reserved for Konrad Nasynski and Jack Attridge, who sat most uncomfortably through an agonizing 22 minute video alongside Molyneux recently (search 'Godus Community Update') as they attempted to reassure us that Godus was banging along terrifically.

But it's not. It could not be more of a mess. In a series of pummelling body blows, Godus has all-but completely collapsed.

It's hard to pick the biggest blow. Let's see... it's late, there's that. There are the Kickstarter stretch goals that have been abandoned. Oh, let's not forget that the PC version – being the one that was backed on Kickstarter, and the one that people want – was put on hold so the goddam mobile version could take priority.

With the mobile version more or less released, was the PC game back on track? Why, no! Most of the team at 22Cans has since been tasked to a new title, which nobody gives a shit about. What do we know about it? That it is the latest roadblock in the way of Godus ever being finished. That's all.

Fewer developers than you have fingers on one hand are now apparently left on Godus. Poor Konrad, who was hired from the community, seems to be the only one left

paying attention to actual game detail, and he's been musing in his posts that the game they have needs a total overhaul in design in order to be something anyone would want to play.

But the train wreck still hadn't fully exploded. No no, in a particularly punishing revelation, Eurogamer tracked down Bryan Henderson, the fellow who had won the very silly Curiosity RSI-sim, earning the title God of Gods in the game when it was released, as well as a cut of the profits. Incredibly, nobody at 22Cans had bothered to stay in touch with him after the win. More than a year passed. Bryan stopped caring, because Molyneux had stopped caring.

The Molyneux MO is taking shape here. Make a big noise, promise many wonderful things, then soak up the spotlight and move

“Bruised, and with growing fear, Molyneux then tried to deflect”

on without actually delivering. We've all known that for years, we were all tired of his puffy pontificating, leading to ultimate disappointment long ago.

What was needed, right at this disastrous juncture of yet another disintegrating Molyneux game, was an intervention.

That was delivered in one of the most profound takedowns in tall poppy history. The bullet to the head was John Walker's gobsmacking interview with Molyneux on Rock Paper Shotgun. Do please read it. No mercy was shown, no rest allowed, in the hour-long destruction of the Molyneux persona.

The interview opened with the question “are you a pathological liar?”, and before you had time to think to yourself “that's a bit harsh”, the tone worsened and the

bloodletting was on. It was quickly apparent that that the opening question had clear context, as Walker relentlessly hammered Molyneux with evidence over the years of promises made and broken.

There, unfolding before our eyes, was a human being stripped bare of his veneer and pretences. It was hard to read. Even if one started to read it and enjoy a little of the tall poppy syndrome that's undeniably present in our DNA, thinking, perhaps that he had it coming, it was nevertheless uncomfortable to watch Molyneux swing through the gambit of reflex emotions. At first he was defiant, eager to prove that in each and every case his promises were kept. But Walker was ready, and knocked down every shallow attempt by his quarry to parry and shift the topic.

Bruised, and with growing fear, Molyneux then tried to deflect, citing his actual past successes which were dismissed as irrelevant and off topic. Walker was a courtroom prosecutor, staying on point, cutting short any meandering from his man in the box, and only moving on once Molyneux was boxed into conceding the point.

Towards the end Molyneux was a shattered mess. “I just want to make good games!” he wailed, finally realising that his usual theatrical bravado was his own worst enemy and only a desperate plea for compassion was left.

In the closing minute or two of the interview he knew the time for talking was over. To protect what was left of his ego and reputation Molyneux promised Walker that he would do no more press interviews until Godus was finished.

Later that day, Molyneux did two more. 🇬🇧



BEN MANSILL likes volcanoes



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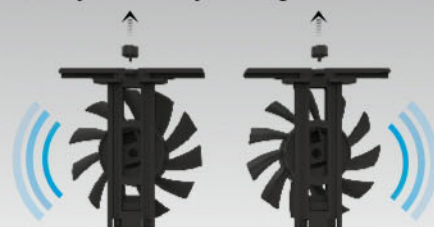
Gainward GTX 960 Phantom, continue the elegant design of the first generation. The new Phantom comes with brand new fans design

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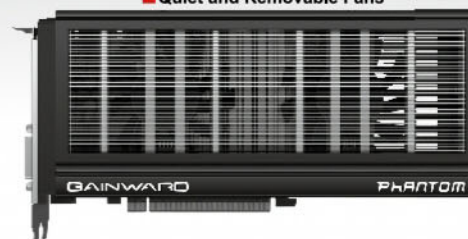
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2 Quiet and Removable Fans



▶ Let's Playing Together

There is decent money to be made on YouTube these days, but the Let's Play phenomenon had to start somewhere. **HEIDI KEMPS** investigates the birth of an Internet sensation.

More so than almost any other technological advancement, the internet has dramatically transformed the way we interface with games. Some of these ways are obvious: we now have easily available, speedy online play and the ability to download full games to our systems with a few button strokes. But the internet has also granted us a worldwide platform to showcase ourselves interacting with games. No longer are play sessions solo, fleeting experiences: in the case of the newer consoles, sharing our game time is a part of the system's functionality. And part of what has defined this paradigm shift that's turned watching people play games into its own form of amusement is the video phenomenon known as Let's Play.

If you've searched for game videos on YouTube or elsewhere, you have no doubt come across some matter of Let's Play video. It's a pretty simple format to grasp: somebody plays a game and then offers commentary about the action happening on-screen. The means by which the video creators do this, however, are wide and varied, and several prominent "Let's Players" have been able to translate their knack for playing a game while amusing a viewing audience into genuine careers.

HUMBLE BEGINNINGS

It's hard to pinpoint exactly where and when Let's Play began. Most will agree, however, that the Something Awful gaming forums were a crucial part of the development of the format. Michael Sawyer, known to the internet as "Slowbeef", was around on the forums during the genesis of Let's Play. "The first one I can remember was back in 2005, done by someone under the name of Luigi Thirty, called 'Let's Play Oregon Trail,'" recounts Slowbeef. "It was a screenshot-and-text sort of thing, and the poster asked other people in the thread to participate. He'd name characters in the game after them, so you'd see funny stuff like 'Poster X gets dysentery'... people got invested in it, and others started to emulate it with stuff like JRPGs, which didn't really work as well."

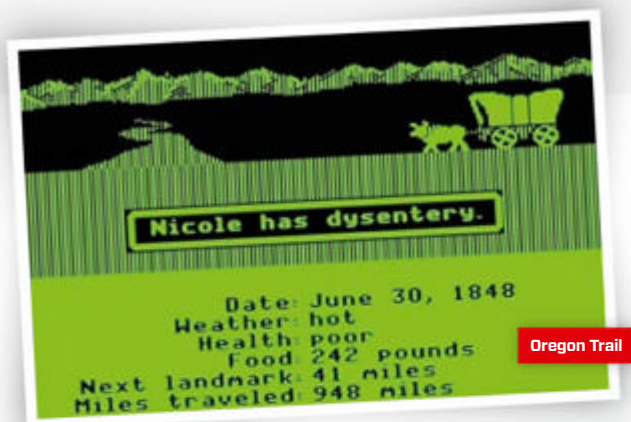
"I think the first 'proper' Let's

Play, however, was one of the adventure game I Have No Mouth and I Must Scream by Vlapthor," continues Slowbeef. "He played the whole thing through, he added his commentary. It was a game most hadn't heard of, so it was interesting to see someone document their playthrough of it. It's the first thing that adheres of the format of what we'd call a 'Let's Play' now."

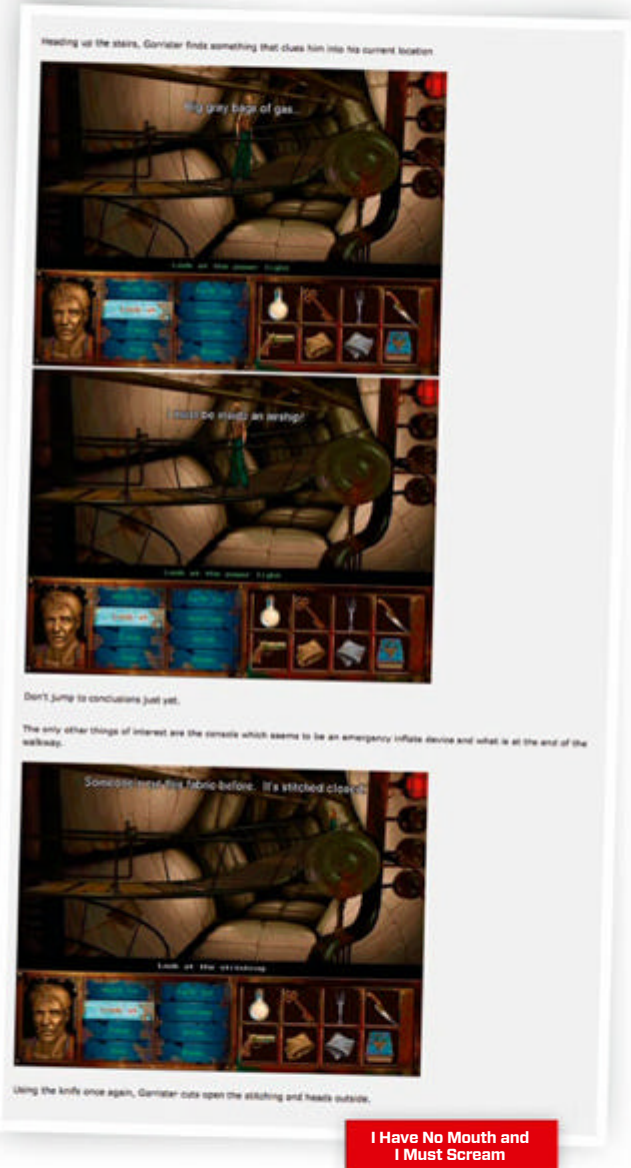
Up until around 2007, most Let's Play threads were in text and picture formats: a screenshot, a few sentences about what was happening in-game, another screenshot, and so on. When Slowbeef posted a thread about PC action/adventure game The Immortal, however, he decided to do things a bit differently: show the action as a video with live player commentary. "It was actually kind of a happy accident," he explains. "The recording mic was having trouble picking up game audio, so I came up with the idea of running commentary." While the thread for The Immortal was well-received on the forums, it wasn't until Slowbeef made a similar video in a seemingly-abandoned screenshot Let's Play thread for Super Metroid that the video-with-commentary format for Let's Play really caught fire.

Slowbeef also invited guests to commentate on his play over Skype, which resulted in some engaging banter over the course of play. (Full disclosure: the author of this piece was a guest commentator in one of said videos.) The format immediately drew a lot of attention, and many jumped on the idea of making their own videos for games they enjoyed.

But not everyone there was quite as enthused. "The mods got sick of it all over the Games forum," says Slowbeef, "so we got a new subforum just for Let's Play." Not long after that, Slowbeef found himself as a moderator for the new forum - and viewed one of the founding figures of Let's Play as a whole.



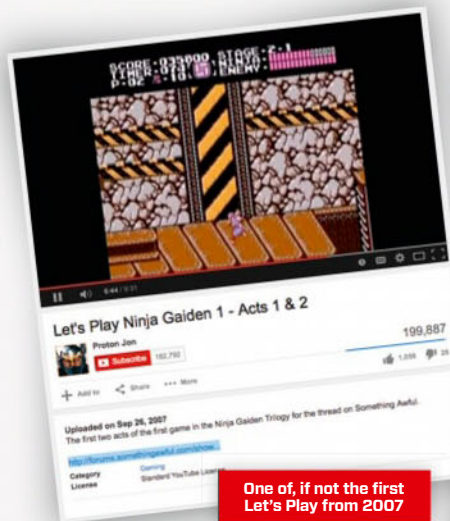
Oregon Trail



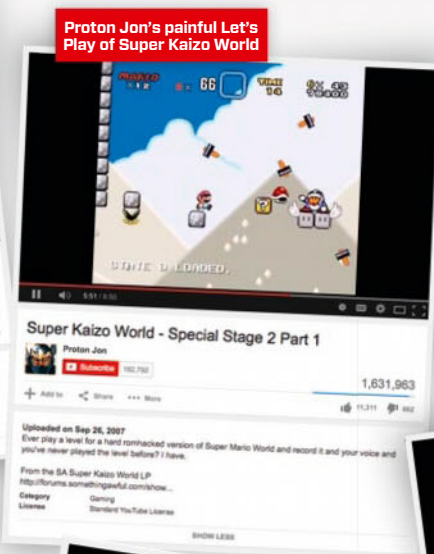
I Have No Mouth and I Must Scream

Text Adventures | While video Let's Plays are much more common, text- and image-based Let's Plays can also prove to be extremely popular. When Something Awful forums user Orenronen decided to play through and simultaneously translate the Japanese adventure game Danganronpa, the result was so popular that it spurred on an English-speaking fanbase for the previously unknown title. Some have posited that it was this Let's Play that led to the official localization - something that's neither been confirmed nor denied.

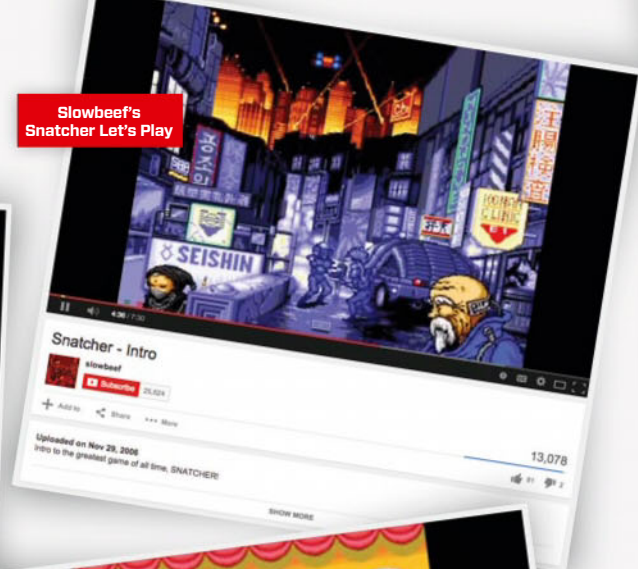




One of, if not the first Let's Play from 2007



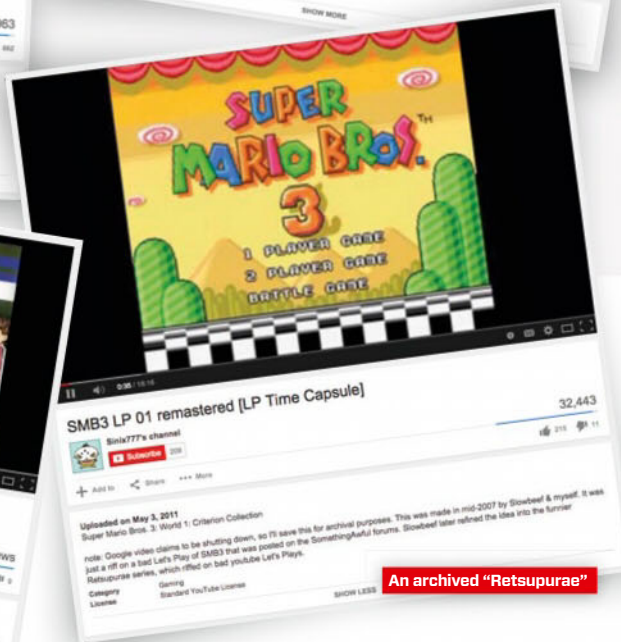
Proton Jon's painful Let's Play of Super Kaizo World



Slowbeef's Snatcher Let's Play



The Tipping Forties



An archived "Retsupurae"

MEDIA FOR THE MASSES

When Jonathan Wheeler – better known by his alias, “ProtonJon” – first started to make videos, he was a college student in Alberta, Canada making videos in-between classes and his job. These days, Jon is one of three members of a group called The Runaway Guys. He and fellow members ChuggaConroy and NintendoCapriSun not only make Let’s Play videos for YouTube – both individually and as a group – but they also put on panels and make appearances at various conventions across North America. They’re backed by Maker/Polaris, who also sponsor other well-known Let’s Play personalities like the Game Grumps and PewDiePie, the most-subscribed person/channel on YouTube.

ProtonJon was one of the first wave of forum users to jump on the video Let’s Play boom on the forums. “I was bored during University, and I saw these guys on the forums doing these playthroughs... I ended up trying it out, and stuck with it as a result.” Soon after, one of Jon’s videos – part of a group effort to take down levels in the notoriously vicious Super Mario World romhack Kaizo Mario – unexpectedly became a viral hit.

After Jon started making videos of

playing through various romhacks, he noticed that his Youtube subscriber counts were increasing dramatically. “I’d see four thousand subscribers, then five thousand subscribers... so I started doing collaboration videos with others, and making a secondary channel. I think the starting point [of my subscriber increase] was just creating romhack Let’s Plays on a regular basis.”

By this point – around 2008 - Let’s Play had begun to spread far beyond just the SA forums. Video Let’s Plays began to spring up all over YouTube, though the forums denizens weren’t terribly enthused by the quality of many of these videos. “At the time, YouTube was a really crappy video host for gaming stuff,” notes Slowbeef. “But people like ProtonJon put stuff on

YouTube, and it really helped spread Let’s Play.”

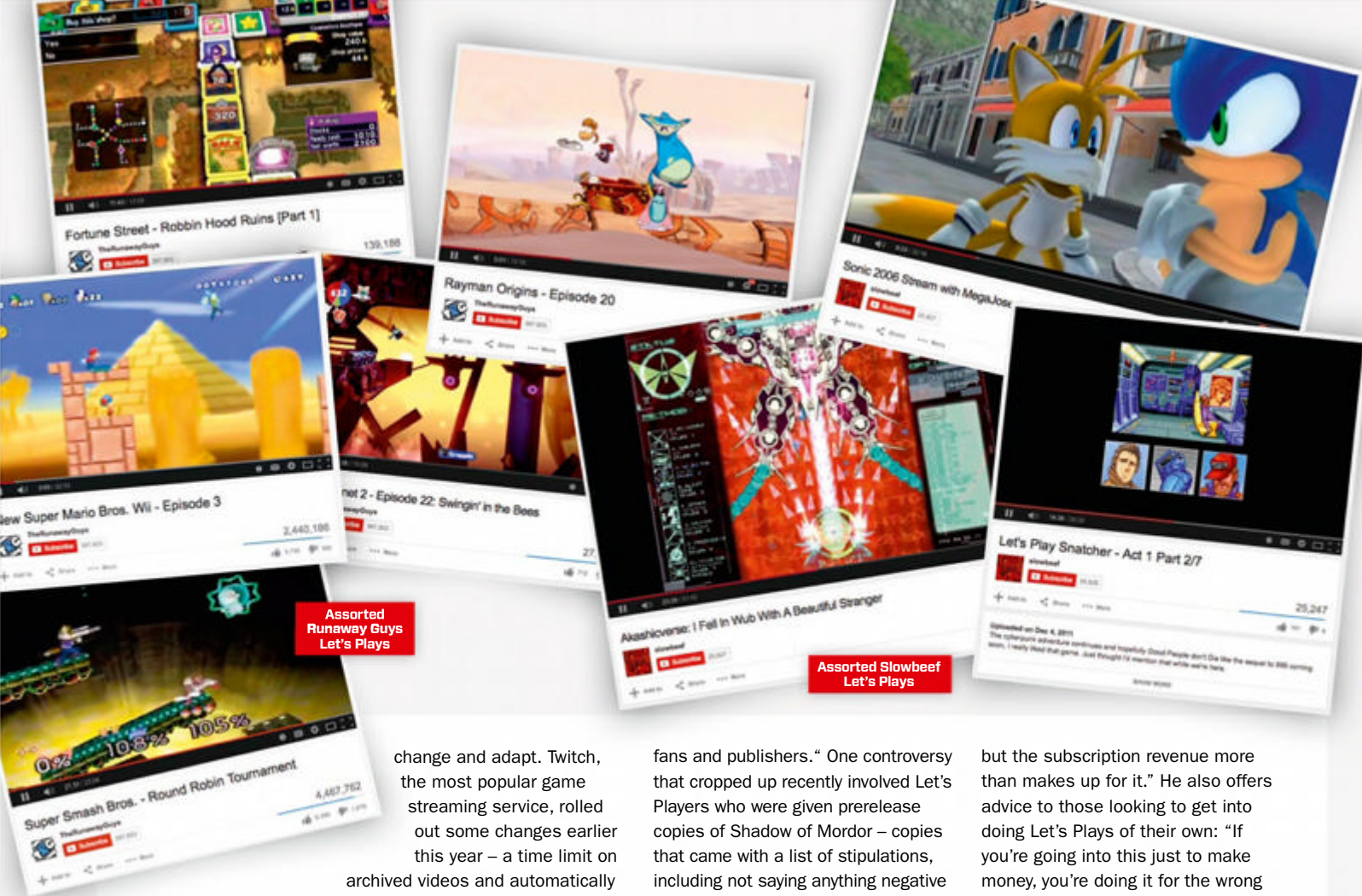
Not everyone was happy about this, though, as many in the forums viewed YouTube Let’s Plays as sub-par imitators. “You could see they were a step behind us... certain people never got the memo for things, like ‘you can’t make a camcorder work.’” The distaste for low-quality videos manifested itself as “Retsupurae,” where forum members would watch and actively mock awful Let’s Play videos – a trend (and a channel) that persists to this day.

By this time, Let’s Play had several established names and personalities. People who frequently appeared in each other’s videos formed groups with names like The Freelance Astronauts and The Tipping Forties.

“Proton Jon was one of the first wave of forum users to jump on the video Let’s Play boom”

Historical Archives | As the Something Awful forums are paid – and access to older posts comes at an additional premium – seeing some older Let’s Plays the forum members produced might seem difficult. However, many of the best Let’s Plays SA members produce – ranging from some of the very earliest to the most recent – are mirrored in a free repository anyone can access once they have wrapped up. Just visit www.lparchive.org to take a trip through Let’s Play history. (The author takes no blame for the lengthy amounts of time you’ll likely spend on this page, however.)





“In the future, I think you’ll be seeing a lot more sponsored streamers”

change and adapt. Twitch, the most popular game streaming service, rolled out some changes earlier this year – a time limit on archived videos and automatically muting parts of recordings if copyrighted music was detected – that caused serious problems for some of its most prominent players. Though Twitch was recently purchased by merchandising megolith Amazon, Jon feels that that is a positive outcome. “There’s a lot of relief, actually... people were worried that if Google acquired Twitch, they would do the same things they did to YouTube. We probably won’t see any major changes until next year.”

“There are some other ethical dilemmas now, too,” notes Slowbeef. “It’s tough when you introduce money into things... People are getting paid to Let’s Play games as a promotional element. I have mixed opinions on that – I don’t think there’s anything inherently wrong for getting paid to do something you enjoy – but sometimes I feel like people can get exploitative with their fans, especially the really big Let’s Players... Some of them are just outright asking for things from

fans and publishers.” One controversy that cropped up recently involved Let’s Players who were given prerelease copies of *Shadow of Mordor* – copies that came with a list of stipulations, including not saying anything negative about the game. “It smells a little funny when you’re given a prerelease copy but you’re not allowed to react to it.”

LET’S PLAY LEGACY

ProtonJon initially met his Runaway Guys partners when they came to him expressing their appreciation for his videos. Though he’s been doing this for a while, he still feels a little awkward – but flattered – when fans come to him, sometimes with very emotional stories about what his videos mean to them. “It’s weird when people come up to you and say you actually had an impact on their lives... It’s a little frightening in some ways, but it’s really heartwarming to hear.”

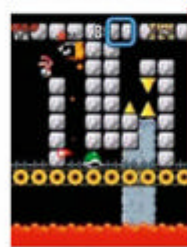
Where does Jon see Let’s Play heading? “In the future, I think you’ll be seeing a lot more sponsored streamers. I think media companies are catching on – that’s the way the money and views are going. The ad revenues don’t compare to YouTube,

but the subscription revenue more than makes up for it.” He also offers advice to those looking to get into doing Let’s Plays of their own: “If you’re going into this just to make money, you’re doing it for the wrong reasons. I did this stuff as a hobby for years – it was just coincidental that I eventually made money off of it. If you’re going to do it, do it for fun or do something original.”

Slowbeef no longer moderates the Let’s Play subforum on SA, he still observes and comments on the scene with frequent co-commentator Diabetus from his Retsupurae channel. He admits to having a cynical view towards the current state of Let’s Play. “When I see some of these videos... it feels like the videogame is secondary to the personality. It’s almost to the point where you don’t really need the game, it’s just a means to get videogame fans invested. And because it’s so personality-driven, people lose creativity... they do the same things over and over again.”

He isn’t entirely pessimistic about the format, however. On the contrary, Slowbeef feels good about what Let’s Play has been able to accomplish. “Let’s Play is a great way to get people invested in something they wouldn’t have seen or known about... you can expose them to new games. It’s a silly, stupid thing where we play videogames for the internet. But little things, like giving people a pick-me-up – it’s stuff like that which makes me step back and say ‘wow, we’ve really got something.’”

Death By Hat | The early days of Let’s Play on the SA Forums were filled with their fair share of silly stories. ProtonJon’s famous viral video of Kaizo Mario, for example, was the result of a weird forum dare. “Some guy posted videos of Kaizo in a Yoshi’s Island romhack thread saying, ‘Nobody here can get past level three of this. If they can, I’ll eat my hat.’ Due to a SA forums rule called the “Toxx clause,” however, not following up on that pseudo-promise could potentially garner a ban. “I raced to get the video up... I literally did it because I wanted to see a guy eat his hat. Though he didn’t, probably because it might have killed him!”



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A Collection Aside



Remember, maybe 6 years ago, when it felt like there wasn't much to play? Sure, maybe the next iteration of some big budget shooter, but not a lot in the way of really challenging, or different, games. In 2015, with more ways for players to support developers financially, as well as hardworking designers taking risks and innovating, there is a real glut of worthwhile content. This month, **MEGHANN O'NEILL** interviews a range of designers about the features that make their games special.

CHILDREN OF MORTA

DEVELOPER DEAD MAGE
PRICE \$15

www.childrenofmorta.com

COMING
SOON

■ Lots of developers are seeking funding on Kickstarter. This is great and we wish them the best of luck with their endeavours. With a lot of games to sort through, however, it can be hard to see which demonstrate the most interesting concepts and how realistic final targets might be. Occasionally, of course, you catch sight of a screenshot on social media and just know you have to back the thing, based on the strength of its rug alone.

Its rug? Yes. *Children of Morta* is a game with a beautiful rug. In washed out orange, purple, green and red, it is elaborately patterned while also being frayed at the edges, worn and loved. It speaks of history and family, perhaps for generations. The pixel art, generally, is absolutely beautiful. The colours are sometimes gentle, sometimes garish, all mixed to illustrate the setting and action. Look closely and you'll even see each wooden board on the house's staircase is unique.

What else do we know about the game? Not a lot, so far. PCPP spoke with Team Lead, Amir Fassihi, who outlines an experience which sounds both compelling and deeply comforting. He says, "We hope players enjoy an adventure in the fantastical lands of Mount Morta while witnessing the struggles, drama and love of a unique family. The idea came to us in one of our initial brainstorming sessions and it just clicked, having various characters with different abilities."

Is it an adventure game? Although designers promise a "specific narrative arc," elements of roguelike structure will be used. Random story events will occur and other content might be procedurally generated, perhaps level design. Fassihi says, "Our developers are fans of the genre, we really like the infinite replay value, continuous surprises and excitements in roguelikes." Combined



with being able to play as any family member, replayability seems assured.

So, who is the family with the beautiful rug? The Bergsons centre around John and Mary, father and mother. He is a warrior with two basic attacks and a shield. It isn't clear, yet, what Mary's support role is but, interestingly, she does appear to be pregnant. Mark is the eldest and practices martial arts, like a monk class. Linda is an archer who is also pictured playing a fiddle. Kevin throws daggers and Lucy wields magic. And, of course, there are two uncles for crafting and a grandma for alchemy.

I don't know about you, but I am starting to wish this was my family. There is enough information to already imagine the camaraderie and friction that might come

with such a vibrant mix of people. At the very least, as Fassihi says, "Different gamers have different play styles and should prefer their character of choice. It gives variety to the game experience," as may the contrast between action combat in dungeons and the warm feeling of home.

For me, anyway, an "instant back" on Kickstarter is relatively rare, but it usually occurs as the result of one, standout feature. I may not precisely understand the artmaking techniques that render *Children of Morta* so incredibly gorgeous, although Fassihi adds, "We do not have the constraints that the old-school games had in pixel art and we can add modern lighting and vfx to come up with a unique look and feel," but I do know I want to look at it, and play it, very much.



THIMBLEWEED PARK

DEVELOPER RON GILBERT AND GARY WINNICK

PRICE \$25

blog.thimbleweedpark.com

COMING
SOON

Ron Gilbert is direct. When earnestly asked what he most hopes people will experience in playing Thimbleweed Park, his reply is, “1987.” Being once the girl who ran home from school in her high-top sneakers to play Maniac Mansion, I can appreciate that. Funded through Kickstarter for US\$626,250, Ron Gilbert and Gary Winnick are relying on nostalgia, humour and threatening to microwave a hamster, to find their audience again. We are, clearly, eager for more.

It looks, if you don’t mind me saying, kind of brown and unattractive, which is brilliant. The characters have oversized heads in a way that you may never have noticed in the 80s, but retrospectively associate with a tabloid journalist on his way to find a two headed squirrel, or the rather sexually empowered Edna Edison. Not sure of the references? That’s OK. There will be new “in jokes” soon enough, ostensibly involving a balloon animal and a corpse.

Surely the most exciting feature of these early LucasArts games, particularly Day of the Tentacle, was switching between characters, allowing for greater complexity in puzzle structure. Gilbert adds, “Maniac Mansion had seven total characters, three playable at a time, and it provided a nice reason to have multiple endings and alternate puzzles, allowing



players to take a break from one puzzle path and play another.” It remains a technique many adventures overlook.

Another throwback, which was never quite replaced by a walk, hand, eye, mouth interface, if not just a general interaction, will be the use of verbs. I can’t recall actually using Push and Pull, for example, a lot. But, if they are there, the opportunity to design puzzles around them is intriguing. Gilbert tells us, “Maniac Mansion had a lot more verbs than Monkey Island. Thimbleweed Park will most likely use the Monkey Island verb set since it represents the pinnacle, to my mind.”

Thimbleweed Park is described as, “dark, satirical and bizarre,” the story of two washed up detectives, a clown, a dead man and, possibly an heiress. The town has a pillow factory and there is a screenshot of two people dressed as birds and holding a toilet plunger. Is there much else we need to know? I, for one, am looking forward to running home from school pick up and sharing the madness with my children all over again, more than I can say. Might even buy some new high-tops.



RON GILBERT

SHARES SIMPLE WISDOM ON WHAT MAKES THIS GENRE SPECIAL.

What makes a great, classic adventure game...

... story?

I like stories where the player and the main character are at an equal disadvantage. It’s why Guybrush shows up wanting to be a pirate, not already being one.

... puzzle?

To find the locked door before the key. Also, hard puzzles should seem obvious in retrospect.

... inventory item?

Something funny and where the player can see several uses for it and the correct one is not necessarily the most apparent.

NINJA PIZZA GIRL

DEVELOPER DISPARITY GAMES

PRICE \$15

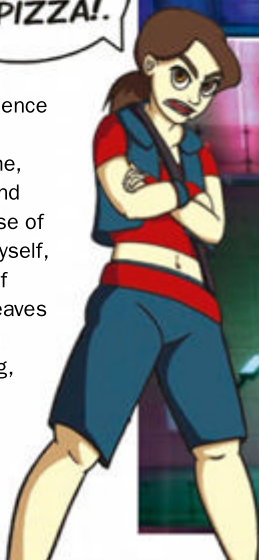
www.disparitygames.com/ninja-pizza-girl/

COMING
SOON

■ PCPP first played *Ninja Pizza Girl* more than 18 months ago and, as it nears release, it is interesting to reflect on how the game has changed. As well as now being successfully funded through Kickstarter, it is clear that this once simple platformer has transcended its genre. It's still fun to play, but is now also quite a unique and evocative experience. By conscientiously considering their subject matter, the developers have allowed the game's core message to influence visuals, story and mechanics.

After a short time with the game, I moved from feeling frustrated and humiliated, to having a quiet sense of achievement. I was a pizza girl myself, many years ago, and the sense of urgency to the task never quite leaves you, but it is the ad which makes this worth practicing, with an eye to success. It would be a great game to play with the family, probably on the night you spend together and order pizza, obviously.

No pants -
NO PIZZA!



ART/AUDIO DIRECTOR, PRODUCER AND CO-DESIGNER NICOLE STARK

ON SENSITIVE SUBJECT
MATTER IN GAMES.

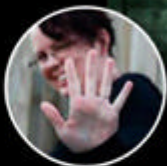
Why is bullying important to portray carefully?

Bullying has not been thoroughly explored in games. A lot of people have written to thank us for starting a conversation about something that has affected them deeply.

Where did you find the information you needed about the subject matter?

Our eldest daughter, the original *Ninja Pizza Girl*, just completed a psychology degree. She directed us to a lot of information on bullying and self-esteem. We also spoke to people from *Beyond Blue* and *Reach Out*, and attended a course on resilience run by a Brisbane clinic called *Minds and Hearts*.

After receiving advice, what changes



were made?

We changed a lot of things; the resolution of the narrative, the way that Gemma recovers when she's too discouraged and ready to give up. Instead of tracking the player's physical health, *Ninja Pizza Girl* tracks something far more relevant; your ability to deal with the crap life throws at you.

Hurting yourself in the game is annoying, but something that Gemma can deal with. Hurting yourself in front of a bunch of your fellow ninjas however, is a serious issue. The rival ninjas all stop to laugh at her. Shadows lengthen and colours drain from the world. If Gemma doesn't stop the ninjas laughing or run away in time she'll fall to her knees and



give up. And giving up is something the player can ill afford when there's pizza to deliver.

On the other hand, when Gemma's spent some time running fast and landing smooth jumps, she gets in the zone. The world blooms with vivid colour and she runs like wind.

What do you most hope players experience while playing *Ninja Pizza Girl*?

I hope they experience what it's like to be a teenage girl; one who is wonderful, brave, clever and different. I hope they see how harmful the petty meanness of people who won't tolerate difference is. And I hope it gives people who are or have been bullied some comfort and strategies for surviving with their sense of self-worth intact.

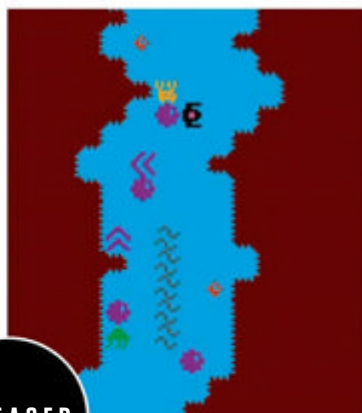
QUARRIES OF SCRED, SEAS OF SCRED

DEVELOPER NOBLE KALE
PRICE \$5, \$3

www.quarriesofscred.com | www.indiedb.com/games/seas-of-scred

Of course, not every developer seeks to fund their game through Kickstarter and the like. Many simply make the game and distribute it through itch.io or similar hosting sites. Although we devoted a third of a page to Quarries of Scred in the PAX special towards the end of last year, Noble Kale has since also released Seas of Scred. This time, you manage air and minerals as you navigate dynamic and treacherous waters, hoping to earn enough credits to buy a new research vessel.

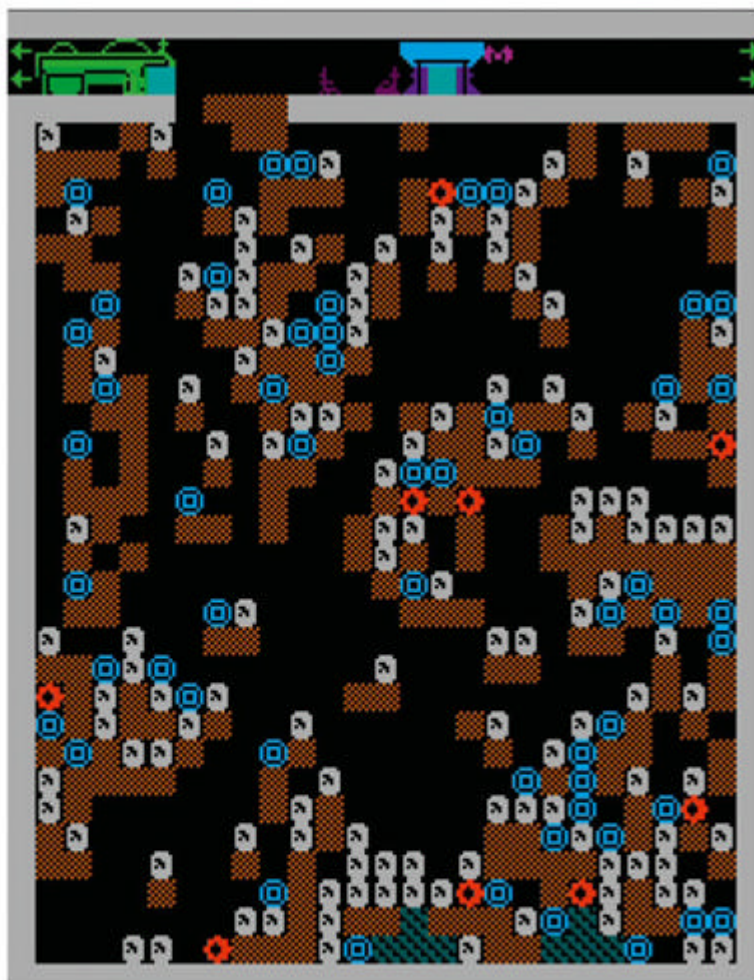
Both games are very simple yet really well balanced, leaving me with an intense curiosity about how one might create such systems. Is it



RELEASED

through experimentation, mathematics or pure luck?

We asked Kale to share some of his secrets. One way or another, games which don't have to prove themselves in order to gain alpha funding are often among the most creative. Both Quarries of Scred, which is probably best described as a very punishing Boulder Dash, and Seas of Scred are finished and ready for you to explore.



DESIGNER

NOBLE KALE

DISCUSSES THE DEVELOPMENT OF QUARRIES OF SCRED.



How did you decide on the game's elements (dirt, gems etc?)

I like games with simple elements, but where people need to figure out how they interact. Some assumptions can be made about how rocks or dirt might work, but there are also a few surprises. When something behaves in an unexpected way that still suits the setting, like mushrooms spreading or falling gems killing you, it adds a lot to the experience.

Why did you add items to purchase from shops, and these items specifically?

The addition of shops and items seemed like a natural progression; it gives the player the nice little feedback loop of earning money and then spending it, while opening up more play options. Also, landmines/lasers are there to fix potentially 'broken' levels.

What kind of formula is used to generate new levels?

I start with an empty grid for each 'screen', then fill each square randomly with the different elements (though some have stronger chances of being selected). Then, I cut out things like the exit/entry points and add in shops. Finally, on some screens there's a chance for special items like stalagmites & stalactites, little 'shelves' of rock, and more exotic things like Rankler nests.

How do you ensure a given level isn't immediately impossible?

I don't. Mostly, I rely on the chances being excessively favorable. You don't get the two arrangements that will completely block off the quarry entries. The odds are really high for that (millions:one) so we're ok. Even if you get the odd 'impossible' one, though, players don't really mind. So long as I don't waste their time. Again, landmines fix everything.

Improving at the game, gradually, is a really satisfying process. How does design support this?

One thing makes it a lot easier: I've never actually 'balanced' the game. There are useless tech items, there are things that are harder than others. I try to just add what I think will be fun and let the players handle it.

What is the most useful thing you learned about procedural generation while making Quarries of Scred?

The joy of watching the complexity it can spit out with just a few steps. I'm not doing anything near as complex as what I see from folks like Tom Coxon & Michael Cook, but QoS makes some really fun levels.



Men & Monsters



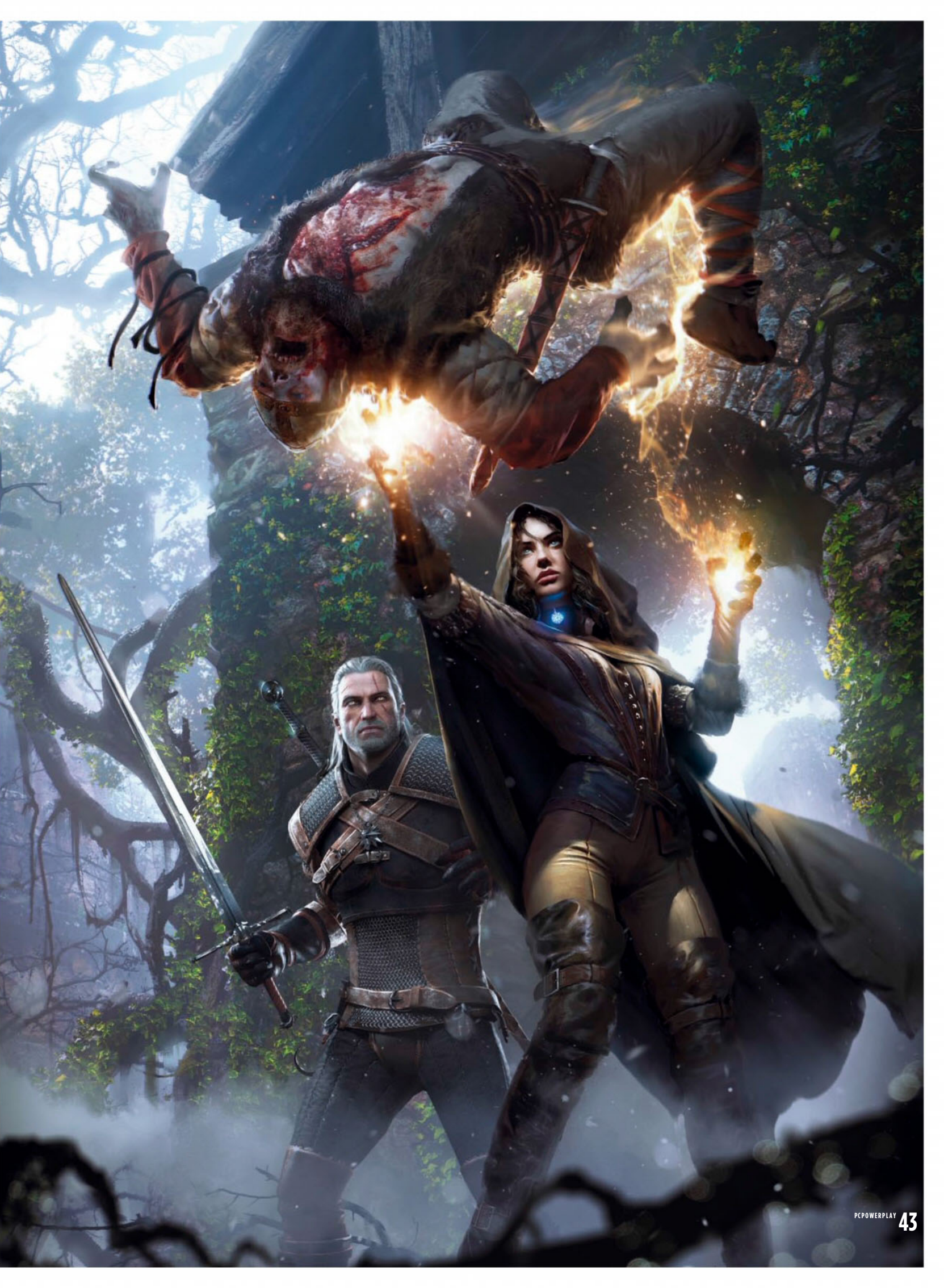
There's a marked tonal difference between American and Japanese RPGs and those developed in Eastern Europe. There are outliers, sure, that delve into themes and topics more commonplace in the other territories, but for the most part European RPGs are more sombre and lacking in overt heroics. America and Japan seem to focus mainly on chosen ones, grand destinies and, above all else, hope, whereas there seems to be a stronger focus on survival and doing what it takes to get by in RPGs created in Europe. "The roots of what you are speaking about lie, I think, in culture and history. Europe saw countless wars and was a giant battlefield countless times. This influenced the way Europeans see valour and heroism, it's really more down to earth here", say Macin Blacha, Lead Writer for The Witcher 3. "The hero is the guy who's dealing with everyday stuff and this can be very tough on its own. At the same time, Europeans are proud and aware of their history, and are not afraid to dive deep into its darker corners in search for inspiration. With games like The Witcher, we want not only to entertain the player, but also provide him or her with food for thought – be it the challenges that

societies face, or the modern world and the mechanisms it's governed by. There are a lot of references in the game that directly touch upon problems people try to tackle everyday".

Jakub Szamalek, the Senior Writer echoes the same ideas. "I'd say that in both Japan and the US, the archetype of a noble, selfless hero, who always sticks to the rules and saves the world, remains popular and is treated very seriously. I think it's quite telling that, for example, Kurosawa's Seven Samurai was so alluring to the American audience and filmmakers and was adapted as The Magnificent Seven with little more than the change of the setting. Both Japanese and American RPGs tend to tell stories of good versus evil, allowing players to become larger than life, be what people should be rather than what they are. In Europe, on the other hand, the noble hero figure is something of the past, something we can't really believe in any more. Our stories tend to be more ambiguous, our storytellers – more disillusioned and cynical. Having said all that, though, I think that both

approaches can result in great stories and I don't think one is better than the other. But the gritty, pessimistic worldview is definitely one of the defining features of the Witcher universe".

THE WITCHER 3: WILD HUNT
 DEVELOPER CD PROJEKT RED
 PUBLISHER BANDAI NAMCO
 ENTERTAINMENT
 DUE MAY 19, 2015
thewitcher.com/witcher3/





LEAD WRITER

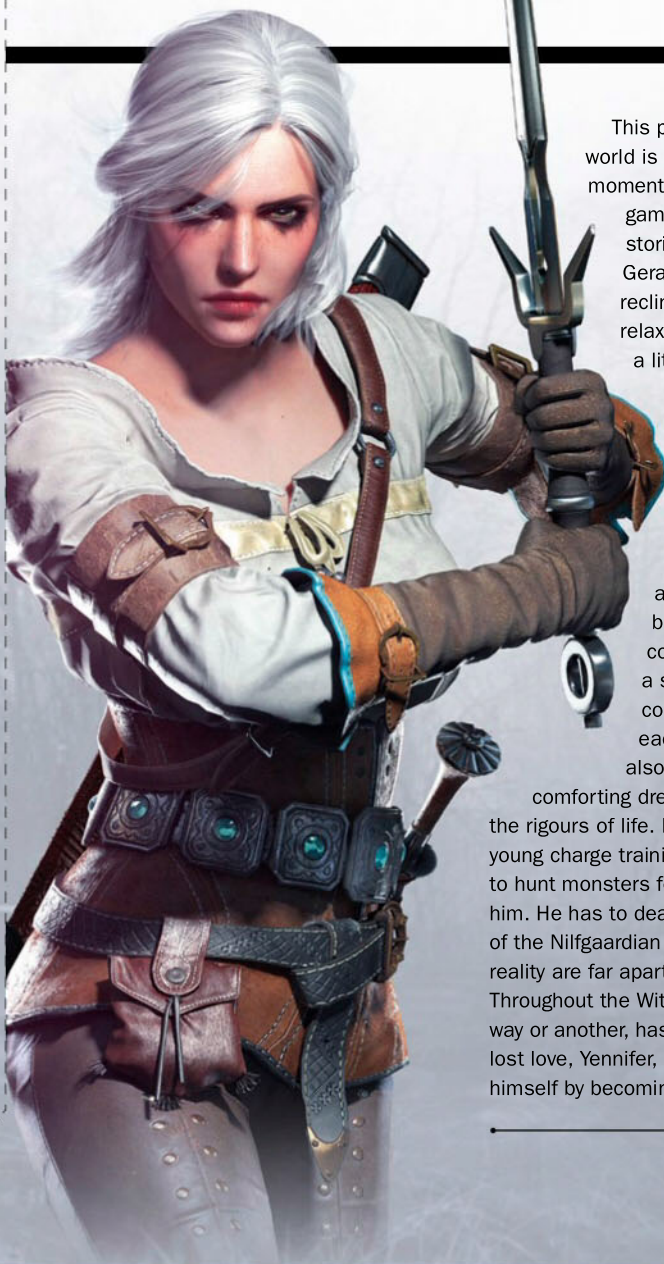
MARCIN BLACHA

The Witcher games have received almost unanimously positive reviews from all around the world and the original novels have been translated into at least 17 languages. What is it you think accounts for such widespread appeal of Geralt as a character?

Geralt is a very interesting hero -- he's a monster slayer, tough and fearsome. He's an excellent swordfighter, he's pretty witty, and gets the attention of many women. It's just cool to become a character like that in a video game, I think. On the other hand, he's an outsider, an outcast despised by society. He gets hired to do the dirty work everyone else is afraid to. He's also a mutant, not capable of feeling emotions the same way normal people do, and this affects his ability to form relationships with others. People treat him as a living weapon and demand from him to act like one, while he himself tries to remain neutral. At the same time, he encounters a lot of everyday problems and has to make a lot of down-to-earth choices. All this is a really potent combination, players feel really empowered when they become him and at the same time solve problems that are sometimes resonating with them on a personal level.

So far, CDPR has been all about The Witcher. How does it feel to be finishing the story and moving on to other things?

It's like going on a vacation without your family - you have a lot of time and you can spend it however you like, but still you miss them.



This pessimistic view of the world is palpable from the first moments of *The Witcher 3*. The game begins, as *The Witcher* stories always seem to do, with Geralt, trying to get laid. He reclines in a bath, naked and relaxed. A segmented creature, a little reptilian and a little insectile crawls into the tub and apparently tries to work its way up the White Wolf's fundament. Yennifer, a beautiful naked woman across the room laughs at Geralt's discomfort and banishes her magically constructed nuisance. It's a sweet scene of a loving couple, comfortable with each other and playful. It's also not real. It's nothing but a

comforting dream distracting Geralt from the rigours of life. He has to train Ciri, his young charge training to be a Witcher. He has to hunt monsters for people who hate and fear him. He has to deal with the consequences of the Nilfgaardian invasion. The dream and reality are far apart but one informs the other. Throughout the *Witcher* games, Geralt, in one way or another, has either searched for his lost love, Yennifer, or has sought to distract himself by becoming embroiled with worldly

affairs he has no business being involved with, or between the legs of his many sexual conquests. The same is true of The Witcher 3. Geralt knows Yennifer has reappeared, and the search for the woman that “smells of lilac and gooseberries” drives him ever forward.

Rivia has never been the happiest of places in The Witcher, but in The Witcher 3 the outlook is grimmer than ever before. In the first town Geralt finds himself in on the trail of Yennifer, fear of outsiders, Witchers especially, is palpable. Nilfgaardian soldiers patrol the streets and keep brutal order. The first port of call is a tavern in which Geralt must search for clues as to who may have seen Yennifer and in which direction she is travelling. Getting information from the population isn't easy. Nobody wants to talk. A little mind control magic can quickly loosen a tongue but it sets Geralt even further apart from the people of White Orchard, leading to a fight with some local louts. They prove no trouble for a trained warrior the witnesses know to fear The Witcher even more.

The town serves as an initial quest hub, but rather than busywork quests, the jobs on offer not only take Geralt back to his roots of monster hunting, they serve to tell the story of the post invasion world. One of the initial quests sees Geralt helping a dwarven smith discover who burned down his forge. The dwarf is a pariah amongst the townsfolk. Although he was once counted as a friend, since the invasion he has been forced to repair the gear of the Nilfgaardian soldiers and the people of the town are sure that the smith is growing fat off the coin he makes. There are no shortage of suspects - everyone is full

of hate for the invaders and those seen to be collaborating with them. What is a Witcher to do? Hunt a man like he would hunt a monster. Rely on his keen senses to find and follow tracks and markings. Find the culprit in the same way one would a werewolf or vampire. Tracking the culprit doesn't only serve to complete the quest - it also fleshes out the reality of the town, the long brewing racial divide, the fear of invaders and the growing resentment of anyone even a little different. Completing the quest reinforces how everything in Rivia is a remarkably dark shade of grey.

In the previous games, much of the investigation when it comes down to tracking monsters or finding clues was tied in to conversation. The decision to fully implement Witcher senses ties in to Wild Hunt in both a mechanical and storytelling fashion, says Peter Gelencser, a Level Designer on The Witcher 3. “We had a grand story we could tell, and now

we have the chance to show many sides to your choices and consequences; and also involved in that we could show what Geralt does and how colourful, mysterious, and sometimes terrifying it is what he does for a living: monster hunting. That of course involves the activities leading up to tracking down these monsters, which is investigating and that kind of tied in with everything else you can do in the game. It's like a secondary layer of exploring the world, getting to the bottom of things, and getting a taste of the lore. It's a really cool thing in my opinion. It is greatly different from experiencing all the knowledge through dialogue, because it's completely up to you how you pace it, and how you observe the environment”.

“What is a Witcher to do? Hunt a man like he would hunt a monster”



SENIOR WRITER

JAKUB SZAMALEK

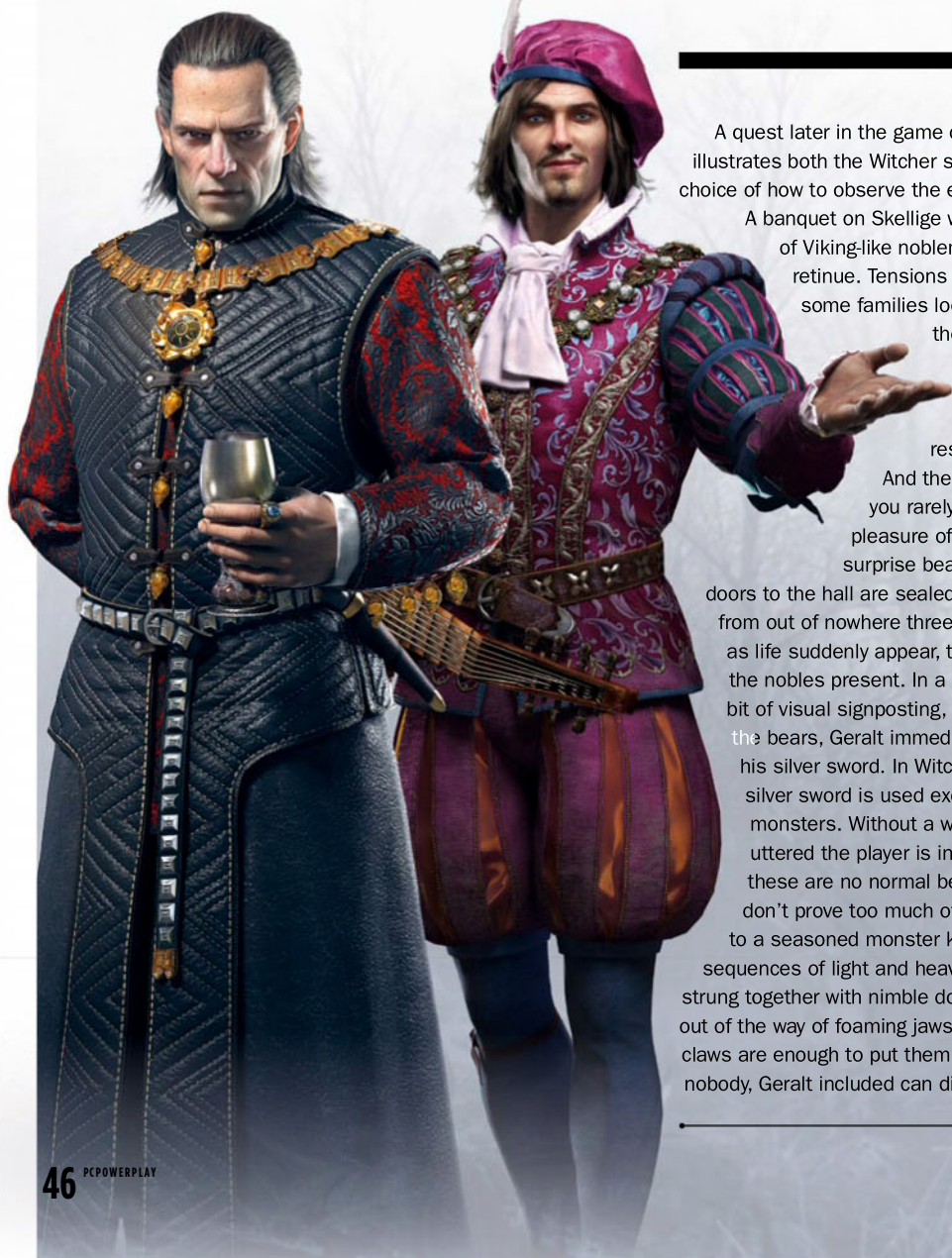
The Witcher games have received almost unanimously positive reviews from all around the world and the original novels have been translated into at least 17 languages. What is it you think accounts for such widespread appeal of Geralt as a character?

I think Geralt's allure lies in that he's an anti-hero, rather than a hero. Yes, he's a great warrior, peerless swordmaster, but he doesn't want to save the world. Deep down, he's probably not even sure whether the world's really worth saving. People don't like him - and he doesn't like most of them, either. Therefore, his goals are more personal, down to earth, easier for us to relate to. He doesn't treat himself too seriously, has a wicked, black sense of humour, and many weaknesses. All in all, he's just fun to read about - and play games featuring him as the main character.

So far, CDPR has been all about The Witcher. How does it feel to be finishing the story and moving on to other things?

We're very excited - and can't wait for the gamers to get their hands on The Witcher. We've prepared almost 100 hours of non-linear, exciting quests, during which Geralt does everything from hunting blood-lusting beasts to going to mask balls and horse racing.





A quest later in the game clearly illustrates both the Witcher sense and the choice of how to observe the environment.

A banquet on Skellige with a group of Viking-like noblemen and their retinue. Tensions are high as some families look to further their political aims whilst others try to restore order.

And then, a thing you rarely have the pleasure of writing, surprise bears. The

doors to the hall are sealed shut, but from out of nowhere three bears, big as life suddenly appear, tearing into the nobles present. In a clever little bit of visual signposting, upon seeing the bears, Geralt immediately draws his silver sword. In Witcher lore, the silver sword is used exclusively on monsters. Without a word being uttered the player is informed that these are no normal bears. They don't prove too much of a challenge to a seasoned monster killer - a few sequences of light and heavy attacks strung together with nimble dodges to get out of the way of foaming jaws and slashing claws are enough to put them down - but nobody, Geralt included can dispatch them

fast enough to stop them carving through the noble families in the hall.

The survivors point fingers at one another, accusing them of setting the bears on each other to knock off any political opposition or for long-standing family grudges. This may be the truth, but to discover the veracity of the accusations, Geralt must do what he does best. Hunt monsters. How he hunts is another matter. The two children of the Jarl couldn't be any more different from each other. The son, a hothead, wants to crack some heads to loosen tongues. The daughter, a strategist, wants to investigate the scene of the crime and find clues to point to a suspect, thereby hopefully avoiding further inflaming the situation. Do you choose expediency or thoroughness? Direct action or circumspect investigation. The choice is yours. Just be prepared to deal with the consequences. **PC**



LEVEL DESIGNER

PETER GELENCSE

DW: The two areas I saw during the hands on session were very different in look. How did you set about establishing these environments? Are they based in real environments?

PG: The two most important inspirations were of course story and realistic places, because that's the key charm of the Witcher universe - that it's always rooted in something realistic; medieval environments imbued with a little bit of believable magic and fantastic and mysterious events and monsters and things. So when we were designing locations we always rooted them in something you can already experience in real life, and then we added all the extra things that make it the Witcher universe.

With the actual landmark buildings - castle things like that...

Some of them were given to us of course by story. When we started developing the locations for the Witcher we were given a loose grid of locations that were required by the story progression. "We will need to get here, there, there, and they are placed in this and that and that region, so we will need that, and this will result in something that looks loosely like this." We have a mock-up map that was already made before the game - before the Wild Hunt - so we had something that we could start work with but we still had a lot of white canvas that we needed to cover the gaps between locations. It is actually a very nice method of developing an environment for a videogame. This is what I like to say how the creation went: it was almost automatic, because we went with the proportions and rules of Mother Nature. We established some mountains, valleys, rivers, gorges - all sorts of things like that - and placed all the key locations on them, and for the in-between places we went like, "Right, we will probably need a village here because there's a forest for hunting, a river for water. It makes sense. If I were a settler I would definitely settle here because it makes sense." Then you establish kind of an infrastructure for a close community, like the Skellige islands where you have to make a living: you have to eat meat, crops; make boats; harvest wood; make linen; herd sheep; and all sorts of things you might find in a medieval community,

land or region. We had to place around, so it makes sense, the whole location. We tried to place them in locations that were welcoming for a community, that were not unreachable - there are natural paths, valleys or whatever leading to them - and in the end it resulted in something that is very comfortable and feels natural to explore including the vegetation and everything you expect to see.

How do you work out the optimal distance between places?

Lots and lots of testing, and finding out what feels comfortable. Initially of course we go with natural proportions and placement just like I explained, but then of course you have to try it. You have to play the story, just exploring, taking a walk all around, and it will be either feel good or not so good and then you reconsider the distance between these two locations because you have to go between them and it's a bit too long, there's not much happening here, so let's try to get something happening there and that's when you involve quest design and community design: encounters, minor landmarks, some events that can happen to spice things up.

So it could be a matter of shortening the distance or place something in the middle to break it up?

Exactly, sometimes we modify terrain, sometimes we make it easier to traverse the lands. Other times we just add extra content. Whatever feels better and more natural.

Where did you start on the project?

What was the first thing you had to do?

The first thing I had to do - I was given the loose grid of the locations, story locations, and the large infinite empty area, and the task: let's make this cool, let's make this part of the Witcher game. That was incredible. First it was super scary, because, oh my goodness I have to do so many things here. But then again it was magical as it happened with the help with all the other people who used to work on the game for a long long time, plus the inspiration that the new people brought in. It all resulted in something fresh but very respectful to the lore

You're kind of responsible for the scope of the game from the original planning?

Well, the layout and the plan, the density of the points of interests, and the general field of the game world.

The delay - polishing, more work had to be done?

Polishing. Absolutely. The game content is locked now. We are not editing anything else. We are getting rid of small nuisances and glitches that we might find. We are dedicating these extra months solely for that so that when the game releases you don't have to wait for patches or whatever. You're going to get something that is very pleasing and a very accessible experience to play.





Pillars of Eternity

Memories of infinity

The Infinity Engine has a special place in the hearts of many gamers. The lush painted backgrounds and combination of voice acting and scrolling text became the benchmark for how RPGs looked and operated in the late 90s and early 2000s. Since that time things have progressed in leaps and bounds, with new and improved graphics engines allowing for more detail, full 3D environments, full voice acting and a fully controllable camera, but even to this day, where games such as Skyrim and Dragon Age: Origin dominate the RPG market, the yearning for more traditional RPG systems remains strong in a portion of the market.

Built using a heavily modified version of the Unity engine, Pillars of Eternity captures both the look and feel of the old Infinity Engine games from the moment it is booted up. Although it is based on an entirely new set of rules and set in a bespoke world, there is a definite Dungeons and Dragons

familiarity to the game. This is a deliberate move by the developers, with

the interface and character shoots highly reminiscent of those from the Infinity Engine games. This sense of nostalgia serves as a neat entry point for fans of the original games but also serves as a fairly easy inroad for anyone even remotely familiar with RPGs.

Basic control feels resolutely old fashioned in a good way, from dragging a square around the party to group them and clicking on the ground to make them move, but there is also a definite sense of modern game design sophistication at work. Character creation choices look as though they will have a definite impact on the way the game plays out, with race, sex and background choices sometimes influencing the way NPCs react to the player's character.

In the Beta we've played, a blacksmith went from being cagey to being distinctly friendly when he noticed the calloused hands of a fellow tradesman (thanks to the chosen background of Labourer), while other reacted with caution due to the fact that our character's chosen race was "Godlike", humanoids with distinctly disfigured heads that many believe are the spawn of either gods or demons. There is a good deal more freedom in



character creation than the traditional Infinity Engine games as well thanks to the fact that all of the character's statistics effect all of their skills in some way – strength effects the damage of all abilities, so it's entirely possible to make a musclebound magic user, or, as Intelligence effects the duration of skills, a brainy Barbarian.

Much like the general control scheme, combat feels both nostalgic and sophisticated, utilising a real-time engine with what is commonly referred to as an active pause – the ability to instantly pause the action at any time to give commands to each of the members of the party. At the current stage of development combat is challenging over all available difficulty levels, with even the most basic of monsters such as wolves or spiders potentially offering a deadly threat. **PC**

DEVELOPER OBSIDIAN ENTERTAINMENT
PUBLISHER PARADOX INTERACTIVE
DUE MARCH 26, 2015
Eternity.obsidian.net



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Heroes of the Storm

Resident MOBA newbie **ROB NORTH** takes on Blizzard's fan-servicing and franchise-mashing offering.

It's been a decade since I first experienced a Multiplayer Online Battle Arena (MOBA) and my opinion of the genre has remained relatively stable over the years - I'm simply not a fan. You can imagine my surprise then when I found myself clamouring for more playtime as my hands-on preview with Blizzard Entertainment's Heroes of the Storm came to a close.

Heroes looks like your average MOBA, but Blizzard have taken big steps to alleviate the steep learning curve that has rendered others inaccessible to new players, the most noticeable of which early game are the intuitive character roles and the removal of purchasable items.

"I think we've struck that balance we try so hard to strike at Blizzard, where anyone can jump into this game and try it," says Lead Game Producer Kaelo Milker, who explains that the game is marketed as a 'Hero Brawler' rather than MOBA as the four letter acronym felt too restrictive for the development team.

"I think when you use a term like MOBA you're putting [the game] in a box with a very established ruleset," he said. "There's some familiarity [in Heroes of the Storm] but we're fundamentally changing the actual root of what you're doing in the game enough that we wanted to call it its own thing."

The distinction is little blurry on paper, but it's a bit like the difference between Call of Duty and Battlefield, or Super Smash Bros. and Street Fighter - same genre, same focus and gameplay, but an entirely different feeling and experience.

I selected Thrall from Warcraft (a melee assassin, who felt a little over-powered, so there are still some balancing issues) alongside franchise stablemates Uther (healing/support damage) and Muradin (tank/stun abilities), Starcraft's Raynor (ranged DPS) and Diablo's Tyrael (another tank). The specialist character Abathur, who can remotely latch onto allies to provide



DEVELOPER BLIZZARD
PUBLISHER ACTIVISION/BLIZZARD
DUE 2015
[Us.battle.net/heroes/en/](http://us.battle.net/heroes/en/)



“the most accessible and enjoyable MOBA I have experienced to date”

assistance through additional skills, was a strong recommendation from the peanut gallery but I thought it was best to leave this unique character for another day.

We were up against seasoned MOBA enthusiasts, but with Heroes a far more team oriented game that features shared team levelling, we overcame our headstrong opponents, who focused on one-upmanship while we coordinated to farm the most experience collectively. The maps also each have unique objectives, ours featuring control points that we kept secure for the possession of a powerful tower, periodically devastated random enemy buildings.

The battle reached an impasse towards the end, but it was once again team tactics

that brought home victory. Mercenaries, tough neutral bosses that will join your team if you defeat them, are scattered around the map. With both teams looking to finish off the end-game merc we took to some nearby long-grass, hiding us from view, and waited for our enemies. When both their heroes and the merc's health were low, Muradin launched himself into the fray from cover with a stunning attack, and we followed with a flurry of abilities for the merc kill and a team wipe.

Heroes is, in short, the most accessible and enjoyable MOBA I have experienced to date. I may have only had a short time with the game, but I'm eagerly anticipating and waiting for my next opportunity to dive in. Bring on Abathur. **PC**

LEAD GAME PRODUCER

KAEO MILKER

TALKS ABOUT TEAMWORK AND ACCESSIBILITY



PCPP: The reliance on teams can make MOBAs a frustrating experience for new players, especially if you don't have a group of friends to play with and end up matched with a group of far more experienced players who aren't interested in incorporating you into their team and just call you a noob. Have you done anything to counteract this problem?

KM: Heroes is inherently more of a team game than traditional MOBAs, and that was a very deliberate decision on our part. This is a game where you live and die by your team. We got rid of the idea of the carry – the one player that everyone is trying to make really powerful so they can literally carry the game. We wanted everyone to have a role, and everyone can do things that contribute positively to the outcome of the game. That does require you to communicate and work together and that means everyone has to be interested in doing that... You have to work with your teammates, and you won't win the game as the one player out of five doing your own thing. I don't think it impacts accessibility, but it definitely is a new twist where the whole 'There is no I in Team' thing is really apparent.

Overall is it more accessible than a traditional MOBA?

We approached this game the way that we do all our games at Blizzard. We have an easy-to-learn difficult-to-master philosophy. I think we've intentionally removed some of the things that might have added layers of complexity that might be harder for new players to get into. I think having multiple battlegrounds was a really big part of [achieving our philosophy]. We have multiple battlegrounds that change the game dramatically – the strategies you employ change a lot, your reliance on your team and coordinating with them to make the right choices at the right moment, and to react to things that the other team are doing are really critical... People who are familiar with the genre will have some things that make them feel at home, while there's this whole new world to explore all the fan stuff we've done to mix it up.



Armello

Whatever you do, don't call them furries

Digital boardgame conversions are nothing new. There are any number of corporeal boardgames that have seen new life on digital platforms – we've all played some version of Monopoly on PC, Ticket to Ride on iOS, or one of the many incarnations of Magic. These conversions come with some advantages as the computer takes on menial table tasks, but aside from some flashy animations, the experience remains largely the same.

There has been a trend in recent years for the creation of digital boardgames that don't have a corporeal counterpart, games that understand the freedom that comes from letting go of physical pieces and boards.

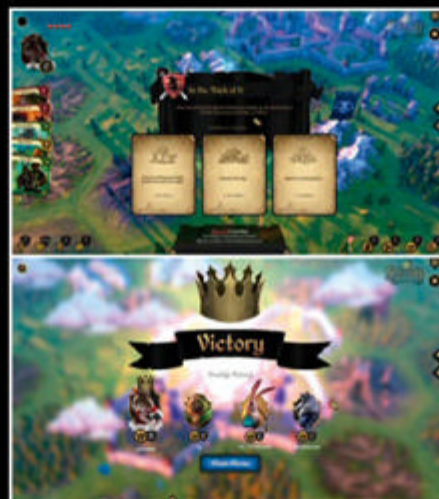
Armello is one such game, and its creators at League of Geeks in Melbourne have a strong grasp of what it means to stop worrying and learning to love the machine. "The big thing we wanted to do was to make things more literal," said Trent Kusters, director at League of Geeks and head designer

on Armello, "boardgames are heavily abstracted, and rely on the player to project

everything around them. Chess is a perfect example: You have a knight, which is a very basic horse shape, and that is meant to tell the tale of this valiant knight, riding around the field of battle with a lance, protecting his king and queen."

By creating Armello in the digital realm, League of Geeks is free to more closely tell these tales. Instead of static pieces moving around a wooden board, we see named characters walking through forests, smoke rising from settlements, and sickness in the eyes of the king, representing the ultimate goal of the game.

Armello's striking, whimsical art direction belies a complex set of intertwined systems that form the tools players need to achieve one of the game's four victory conditions. Players take the role of one of four characters, all vying for the throne of Armello. The current king is stricken with Rot, a disease which brings the afflicted more power the closer they come to death. Each player will choose a strategy based on the strengths of their character, the observed strategies of the players around them, and the cards that fate has dealt. Players can achieve a prestige



victory by performing acts of valour, with Spirit Stones to cure the king of his illness, by killing the king and taking his place, or by gaining more Rot than the king and slaying him with ease.

Armello will be in Steam Early Access until mid-year, but given its startling level of polish, you would be forgiven for assuming it was finished. The rough edges only show themselves with close inspection, in the form of balance and player agency issues. League of Geeks is well aware of many of these issues, and is working hard on feedback gathered from its Early Access and Kickstarter patrons to improve the game.

So, take the time to check out one of the Australian indie scene's crowning jewels. Armello is special, and will only improve with age. **PC**

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It's amazing how cyclical the games industry seems right now. On the one hand, you've got games like Total War: Attila - a sequel to a game that was really not at all popular. But Creative Assembly has taken all the negative reviews and actually assembled a game that's fun, and very, very challenging, but obviously built on what has come before.

Then you've got the Homeworld Remastered Edition, which is evidence of a whole other kind of cycle. We're used to seeing Hollywood churn out remakes (man, someone pointed out the other day that we're likely ten years away from a Lord of the Rings remake, which is odd), but now the games industry is doing the same.

In this case, though, it's pretty welcome. The Remastered Collection keeps the classic, and still remarkably fresh feeling gameplay, and melds it with modern, hi-res graphics. It's a stunning combination, and given the proliferation of remakes right now - from Grim Fandango to Abe's Oddysey - something that's quite welcome. It's great to go back to old games, but they're often much better in recollection than in fact.

Maybe someone can do a remastered Dark Forces...

DAVID HOLLINGWORTH

Online Editor

dhollingworth@nextmedia.com.au

SCORING SYSTEM | PCPP scores its games on a 1 to 10 scale. The higher, the better – though 10 is by no means a “perfect” game. We’re not convinced such a thing exists, so consider a 10 a masterpiece of PC gaming, despite its inevitable flaws. A 5 is a decidedly average game; one that doesn’t excel in any particular area, without being an affront to our senses – the ultimate in mediocrity. Below this, you’ll start to find the games our reviewers suffered an aneurysm getting through; above it, the titles truly worth your time and money. And remember: a score is only a vague indication of quality. Always read the full review for the definitive opinion!



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WE PLAY ON ORIGIN!

During our frequent trips across Australia and around the globe, when we get that gaming itch, we just grab our EON 17S Origin Laptop. Extreme is the word, our lappy runs a 4GB GDDR5 NVIDIA GeForce GTX 680M Graphics card pumped out through an amazing Full HD 17.3-inch display at 1920x 180, and has the brains of an Overclocked Intel Extreme Edition Core i7-3920XM Quad-Core 4.5GHz chipset to run everything. Add to that 32GB DDR3 1600MHz Memory and a 480GB Intel 520 Series - Solid State Drive and you have one serious mobile gaming solution. Don't just take our word for it, you can check them out yourselves at www.originpc.com.au and tell em' PCPowerPlay sent ya'!



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Evolve

Dave KozECKi and David Hollingworth are on the hunt.

DEVELOPER TURTLE ROCK STUDIOS
PUBLISHER 2K GAMES
PRICE \$US59.99
AVAILABLE AT STEAM, RETAIL
www.evolvegame.com

DH: You know, Evolve seems to be one of those games that's, a) going to really divide people, and 2) be one of those titles that you only get out of what you put into it. It has a really quite difficult learning curve, based upon the necessity to learn non-typical weapon skills, and understand the flow of maps and game modes. On top of that, it's not the kind of game where you can simply apply yourself to one aspect. In Battlefield, for instance, you can focus on being a good Recon/sniper; in Evolve, though, because you never quite know what Hunter role you're taking, or if you'll be the big bad Monster, the initial dozen or so hours can be quite confronting.

DK: Well, I'm happy to play the Riggs to your Murtaugh in this instance (cue sexy saxophone). Adapt with the times, Rog. I'm assuming you're talking about Evolve's multiplayer system, where you dump your choice in order of preference and get a lucky dip on which class you play when you land online, or even find yourself filling the big britches of a monster? I kind of like it, to a point. It keeps you on your toes.

I jumped straight into the multiplayer and loved the

challenge of picking it up on the fly. The weaponry, while diverse, is limited, the on-screen tips and prompts were informative yet unobtrusive and in-between rounds it hits you with a mini-tutorial on the class and arsenal. I thought it was a refreshing change from the usual super-obvious tutorial phase and COD styled advancement and enjoyed unlocking new Hunters as I levelled up, rather than attachments or top-tier things that go pew-pew.

FYI, I'm focusing on the multiplayer alone because why

“I'm happy to play the Riggs to your Murtaugh in this instance (cue sexy saxophone)”

on earth would you even play the single-player other than to use it as a tutorial? I think it's rock solid Turtle Rock decided to include it for those three people in the world who game without an internet connection (first world elitism, I know, but it doesn't make it not true), or don't like hitting it up with random gamers. Truth be told, it's actually quite robust and handles rather well, but I feel Evolve is at its best when you find yourself mid-clusterfuck

with a crew of bad-arses tracking a monster and doing your best to avoid the 2-minute dropship respawn known as death. It's a relief and gratifying to know that the future of gaming includes The Fifth Element styled instant body reconstruction if you happen to bite the big one. But enough about me, what were your feelings on it?

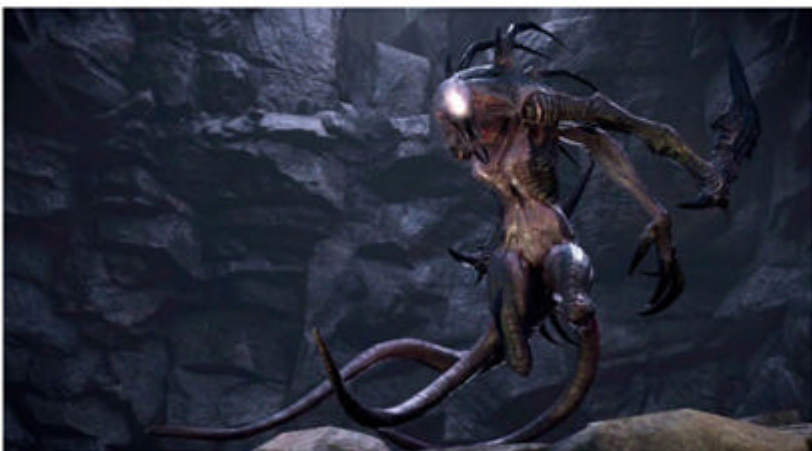
DH: Wait, you're willing to be Mel Gibson? That's... courageous.

I think I've got to admit that overall my feelings on the game are mixed. At it's best, there is no shooter quite like it, and as you

run-n-gun, focus on healing... whatever you wanted. And, similarly, you had choices playing as zombies, too.

I admit, I have had some great, remarkably tense rounds, but I've also had a lot of very lackluster ones, especially playing as the monster. The learning curve to understand monster powers, the layout of maps, and how best to deal with different hunter combos, is a real challenge.

DK: I'm really interested to know, just how much did you play as the monster? I don't know if it's decades of gaming which has instilled in me a none-too-subtle hero complex, but I seriously preferred to play as a team of 80s styled action cliches (yes, a compliment). I didn't mind turning the tables as Goliath or Squid-boy and the Wraith and thought the wealth of attacks for each was surprisingly deep, but it didn't really hold my interest for long. After a round I was itching to take something larger than life down. The fact it was powered by a fiercely human intellect meant no two games felt the same. Some played hide and seek, others preferred a more direct fists on approach, a few were downright devious and crafty, sneaking to not



leave tracks, doubling back on itself and laying in wait, splitting us up and tearing the team apart when we all should have known better. I never knew what to expect, and it kept me on the edge of my seat, eager almost hungering for more.

This split in gameplay is obviously what Turtle Rock had in mind from the start, to present the best of both worlds, and it definitely succeeded in my book. I think choosing to go down either the hero path or the misunderstood behemoth could be just as polarising as the points you made at the start of this review.

Colour me nosy, but given your well-documented predisposition to sniping, sniping, err Wesley Snipes, you know what I mean... did you predominantly favour Val, the weak-spot targeting long-distance medic (who I really really enjoyed playing), or did you branch out more like I did and enjoy the radically different Whitman's Sampler of classes? In case you hadn't noticed, I kinda dug everything about the Hunters in *Evolve*, particularly mixing it up and swapping between the different perks and specific weapons within each class. I felt I was always uncovering something new to play with.

The way the Hunters' abilities fed off each other was really quite clever. Things like using a tranquilizer or harpoon to slow a beast down so it was ripe for an orbital strike, peppering it with precision armour-piercing shots to expose weak points so a lightning gun toting ally could go to town up close or even the simpler things or burst-healing or shielding from afar...OK, I'll shut up now. Thoughts?

DH: Like I said, when *Evolve* comes together, it's unmatched, and the tension of whittling down the monster's health, and then

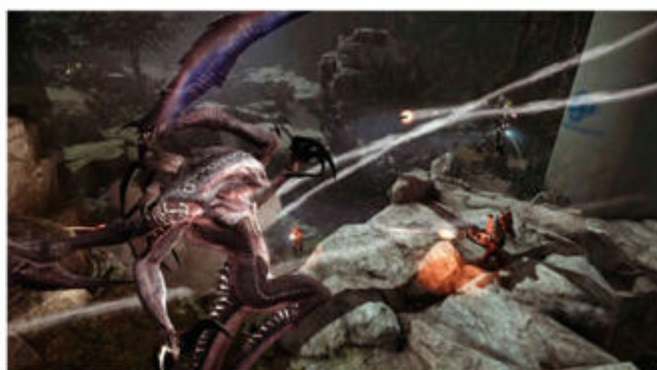
losing a team-member, and then just trying to hold out until your party is up to full strength again is truly epic. As to classes, I generally went with the big guns, because while I am by nature bit of a low down dirty sniper, *Evolve*'s take on the class really isn't about sniping. After all, you can't really one-shot the monster, so it just feels like a different tempo of damage-dealing. And, really, sniping's not that character's point - it's really all about keeping people alive, and I've never been a great healer.

Playing as the monster was arguably a lot more fun, personally, because it removes

simply let the AI handle all that annoying travel, and it really is better at using the jumppack than a lot of players.

But the neatest trick this offers is a really handy get out of jail free card if you're feeling beset as the monster. The AI may not care about feeding or attacking too much, but it is excellent at fleeing, and will almost certainly take you straight to the best hiding place. It's a great way to learn the map, even though it does feel like bit of a cheat.

So far, you seem pretty hyped about the game.



“I couldn't tell you exactly what's missing, except maybe for any kind of narrative”

any possible teamwork issues from the equation.

Speaking of the monster, though, it's worth mentioning one of the game's more curious features. You can basically let the AI take over for you for a short amount of time, so you can, I don't know, go pee or get a refill of your favourite beverage. The AI's not great, but it at least means you're never sitting there with your virtual self zoned out and just waiting to be pounced on. And at times, the relentless track, fight-track pace of the game can get a bit much, so it's nice to

DK: Well, it wasn't all sweet bug hunts and brewskis. A few things, specific to online play irked me. The servers were pretty schizophrenic, either immediately dropping me into a match or keeping me waiting for minutes on end, then often dumping me into a match just as it ended only to be pushed back to the Lobby. Another thing that grinded my gears was with such a distinct split between playstyles, why not have a simple Hunter/Monster option before you enter match-making? These were only pedestrian niggles.

The gameplay is insanely tense and trapped me completely, the level design is fresh and nuanced, if you go it in single-player the AI bot teammates are competent enough to help you through and I highly recommend you spend most of your time in Evacuation Mode where you play five different game types with the winning team grabbing a boost for the next round. Yes, I'm gushing but it just grabbed me, and my gosh it's so damn pretty.

DH: I think we're going to have to agree to disagree on this one - it seems your minor niggles are much larger gripes for me, and I have to admit, it's really not pulled me into any kind of long term play habit. I just feel it's not quite a complete game; I couldn't tell you exactly what's missing, except maybe for any kind of narrative sense to the whole thing beyond 'Monsters are bad, mm-kay'. I think, for me, that would certainly help to give all the carnage some context. It's very pretty carnage, but it just doesn't seem all that consistent compared to other titles. I can log into *Battlefield 4* and know what I'm going to get, and play the class that I want; *Evolve* is a bit too random for me, both in how it wants me to play ('Gee, I could really go the Monster now, but, oh no, you're a Hunter. Poop.') and the quality of that play ('Bro, do you even heal?!?'). So, I can't quite get behind this title, which leaves us with bit of a quandary when it comes to scoring. I've said my old-man piece, so let's leave the game with a more positive score, as it seems *Evolve* really is a matter of taste.

Dave, do you want to close the piece out with one more gush?

DK: Gush!

DH: Perfect. *DAVID HOLLINGWORTH, DAVE KOZECKI*

WHY SHOULD I CARE

- Hunting is in your blood.
- Hunting is always better with friends
- Killing hunters is in your blood.
- You like feeding on blood so you can evolve.
- Friends are only for eating

OR TRY THIS



LEFT 4 DEAD
TURTLE ROCK STUDIOS • 2008
One of best co-op titles ever made
Zombies are sssooooo overplayed



THE HUNTER
EXPANSIVE WORLDS • 2014
Nothing breathes fire in this game
Nothing breathes fire in this game



RAMPAGE
BALLY MIDWAY • 1986
All monster, all the time
Just a touch retro

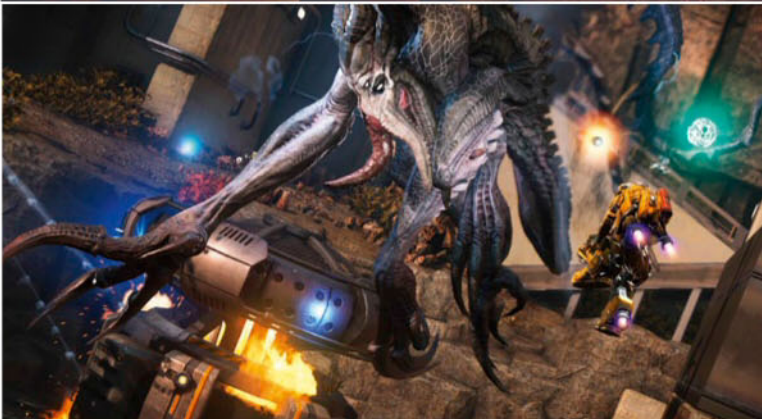
VERDICT Not for everyone, but if you like a mix of solo and co-op play, and big monsters, *Evolve* is very solid indeed.

8

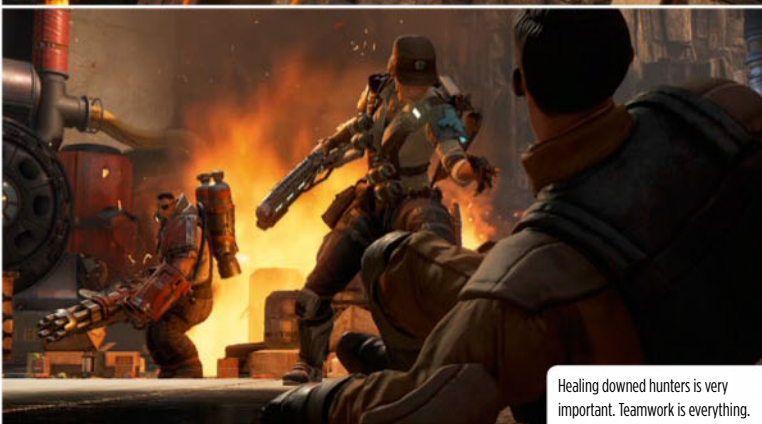


A MONSTER'S LIFE

1. Here's your health bar, which also features your progress to evolution.
2. Your abilities and their timers - you really need to pay attention to this!
3. Thankfully hunter health is also shown, so you can make sure to pick on the weak ones.
4. Seeing through walls is a big help.
5. In case the health bar wasn't enough, your skin will reflect your damage state.
6. WARNING, MONSTER ROBINSON!



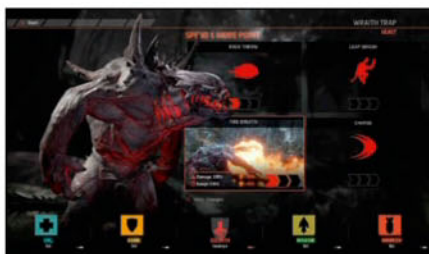
Oh great - this one can fly...



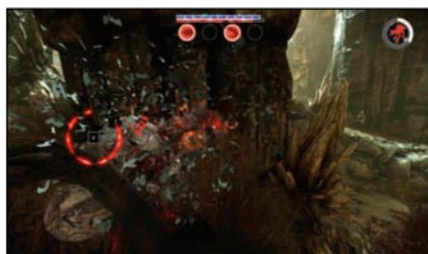
Healing downed hunters is very important. Teamwork is everything.



THE CYCLE OF LIFE



1. First you eat the food.



2. Then you evolve.



3. Then you crush the hunters. Simple!

Apotheon

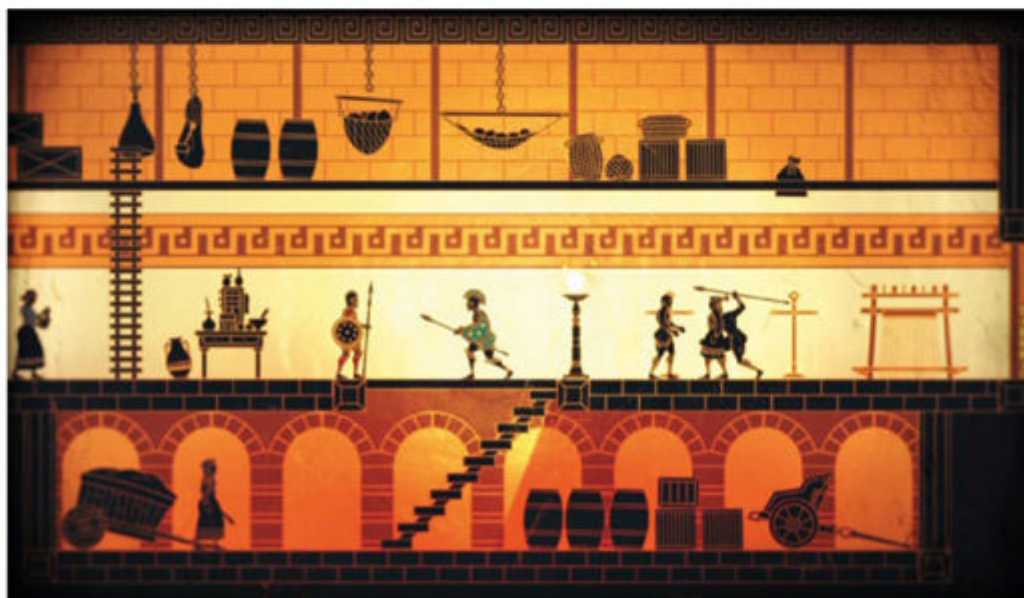
The gods should learn to leave it in their pants

DEVELOPER ALIENTRAP
PUBLISHER ALIENTRAP
PRICE \$14.99 USD
AVAILABLE AT STEAM
www.apotheongame.com

In the before time, the long, long ago, Jordan Mechner created a game that formed the template for side scrolling platformers. Prince of Persia was a landmark game, featuring clever level design, hard melee combat and beautiful animation thanks to Mechner using his brother for rotoscoping. Apotheon takes a very different visual approach to the original Prince of Persia, but the legacy of the legendary platformer is still evident in the way it plays and feels. This is definitely a good thing.

Players take the role of a humble soldier named Nikandreos, a heroic figure but one who is definitely human. After saving his village from invaders, Nikandreos draws the attention of Hera, Queen of Olympus and mother of gods. She is more than a little angry with her divine brethren. In Greek mythology the gods are flawed creatures, as prone to whims and folly as humans, and it is this flawed nature has angered Hera so much. Zeus can't keep it in his pants, constantly disguising himself and bedding mortals but this isn't all that has turned Hera against him. Zeus has grown to hate humanity and has vowed to destroy them, gathering the other gods to his side and cutting all but the most aggressive ties with Earth. As Hera's champion, Nikandreos travels to Mount Olympus to gather power and do battle with the gods.

Apotheon draws its visual



Probably the most exciting pottery you will ever get your hands on.

“It’s a remarkably pretty effect and one that informs gameplay as well as style”

inspiration from Greek pottery. Characters appear and move almost like shadow puppets, hinged at joints but otherwise static. It's a remarkably pretty effect and one that informs gameplay as well as style. The hinged animation plays into the control scheme, with the keyboard being used for basic movement and the mouse being used for orientation. Nikandreos faces in the direction and angle of the mouse pointer, an ability that is vitally important in combat. A huge variety of weapons ranging from simple wooden clubs through to magical artifacts can be found and used

during the adventure. Each of these weapons has different attack ranges, damage and timing. If holding a shield, both the player and enemies can block in the direction they're facing. Rather than being something like limited immunity to damage, shields are directional, so angling attacks over and under shields is essential for survival. What initially appears to be a rather simple combat system proves to have more than enough depth to remain challenging and entertaining throughout the entire game.

Each level features multiple objectives that must be

completed before Nikandreos can move on. No two are entirely alike - one may see you trying to hunt a giant boss creature whilst another may require a stealth approach as any direct combat will prove nigh impossible. This mixing of challenges keeps the action fresh and compelling throughout. Combine this with a crafting system that allows Nikandreos to create potions and special items to heal, summon ghostly wolves, become invisible and more, and you have an old fashioned side scrolling action platformer that has all the hallmarks of being a very modern game. **DANIEL WILKS** 🇬🇧

WHY SHOULD I CARE

- Your mother was visited by a giant swan
- You have a fetish for pottery
- You want to kill Zeus but won't touch a console

OR TRY THIS



LEGENDARY
SPARK UNLIMITED • 2008
 ■ A new take on Greek mythology in FPS form
 ■ It's rubbish



PRINCE OF PERSIA
BRODERBUND • 1989
 ■ Groundbreaking animation and platforming
 ■ Goddamn spike traps



SHOVEL KNIGHT
YACHT CLUB GAMES • 2014
 ■ Extremely challenging and rewarding action platforming
 ■ No real exploration

VERDICT A challenging, beautiful and rewarding old-school action platformer with a very modern twist.

8

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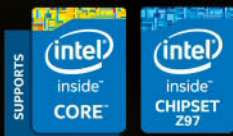
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Hand of Fate

The real cards against humanity.

DEVELOPER DEFiant DEVELOPMENT
PUBLISHER DEFiant DEVELOPMENT
PRICE \$24.99 USD
AVAILABLE AT STEAM
www.defiantdev.com/hofpress/

The Australian made indie Hands of Fate is a difficult game to pigeon-hole as it draws elements from so many genres. It's part deck building card game, part loot based action RPG and part choose your own adventure narrative in which the player battles against the dealer and hopes that the next card they draw is the one they need. It's about resource management and tactical movement, fast paced Batman style combat and gearing right to meet the challenges. It may be a strange mesh of ideas and styles, and one that take a little getting used to, but once you grasp the general mechanics, Hand of Fate shows itself to be an extremely clever and equally enjoyable game.

The game plays across two distinct styles - movement and encounters. Cards from the AI dealer's deck form the map. At the beginning of each map the cards are all placed face down so aside from knowing that either an exit, or the boss on the last in a series of maps is under one, the contents of the rest are unknown. The player can move one space at a time. Landing on a card flips it, revealing an event or a battle. Events include things like meeting a devil who offers a choice of combat challenges for a reward to starving peasants who need food, or stumbling across a trap filled maze with a treasure chest at its centre. Some of these events have special objectives within them,



“Hand of Fate shows itself to be an extremely clever and equally enjoyable game”

rewarding players with a token that can be exchanged for new cards once the sequence of maps is finished. Battles drop the player into a third person action mode in which they must defeat a certain number of monsters native to the map, or, in the final map of a sequence, a boss. The combat engine is simple, with an attack, a shield slam, a dodge roll and a Batman: Arkham Asylum style counter, but the variety of monsters and the layout of the arenas makes them a fun distraction. Killing monsters rewards the player with loot cards. These can be in the form of gold, food or equipment.

To aid them in battle, players can construct a deck of equipment cards they have been rewarded by finishing maps. This gear isn't available from the outset, but good deck construction is crucial as new gear gathered during a map is pulled from the player's deck. So far so good, but then add in fact that every move takes one food but heals at least 10 life. Food can be bought from shops, but as they are random cards there's no guarantee there will be a shop on any given map. Do you make extra moves to heal with no guarantee of finding a shop before you run out of food and

begin to take starvation damage, or do you press on in the hope that you won't encounter any truly dangerous foes? There's a similar divide when it comes to deck building. As the character completes maps, more cards are rewarded and the number of cards that can be included in the deck grows. You can put all your good cards in the deck, but this adds more randomness to rewards. You can limit the number of cards but this also limits the number of possible rewards. What's a card/action hero to do?

It's a head scratcher. It's also really fun. **DANIEL WILKS**

WHY SHOULD I CARE

- You don't think Magic has nearly enough button mashing
- You don't like your genres to be too defined
- You want to support great Aussie indie development

OR TRY THIS



CARD HUNTER
BLUE MANCHU • 2013

- Lovingly cheesy CCG/D&D pastiche
- No real time action



HEARTHSTONE
BLIZZARD • 2014

- Fast paced CCG action
- Goddamn overpowered decks



MTG 2014
STAINLESS GAMES • 2013

- Will make you love MTG again
- Will make you love MTG again

VERDICT Occasionally suffers from a bit of slowdown but otherwise Hands of Fate is a highly polished and idiosyncratic joy.

9

Life Is Strange: Episode 1 - Chrysalis

Something about a butterfly flapping its wings.

DEVELOPER DONTNOD ENTERTAINMENT
PUBLISHER SQUARE ENIX
PRICE \$4.99 USD
AVAILABLE AT STEAM
lifeisstrange.com

You were in The Blue Lagoon and I'm a blue haired goon... what the? That's terrible!

French videogame developer Dontnod left mixed impressions with its debut game, *Remember Me*, garnering praise and condemnation in equal measure for the story, combat and platforming but also gathered quite a bit of praise for the strong female protagonist and the ambition of the storytelling. Dontnod's second outing, *Life Is Strange* is a very different affair, eschewing many of the troublesome aspects of *Remember Me* and instead concentrating on proven strengths - ambition and a strong female lead. The result is a wonderful, melancholy adventure that combines a troubled homecoming, mumblecore and time travel in a memorable and extremely enjoyable way.

Maxine Caulfield is a shy photography student, recently returned to her hometown, Arcadia Bay in Oregon to study at the prestigious Blackwell Academy. Ostracised from her former best friend, Chloe due to a lack of contact over the five years of her absence, Maxine is something of an outcast, not cool or rich enough to be part of the influential Vortex Club and not outgoing and friendly enough to have a wide circle of friends. To make matters more confusing for a young, insecure woman, upon waking from a vivid nightmare in which a massive hurricane obliterates



“At any time Max can rewind time a little enabling the player to change outcomes or decisions”

Arcadia Bay, Max also discovers she has the ability to control time, allowing her to rewind to certain points and rethink her initial decisions.

The time control concept permeates every aspect of *Life Is Strange* and forms the crux of the action in this otherwise fairly traditional point and click adventure. At any time Max can rewind time a little enabling the player to change outcomes or decisions, or use new information to inform dialogue choices. One of Maxine's first uses of her power is to feign knowledge. She is asked a question in class but

doesn't know the answer. When another student answers, Max can rewind time and answer the question again, this time using an extra dialogue prompt with the correct answer as provided by the other student in the future. These back and forth games with time form the backbone of the puzzling in *Life Is Strange* and for the most part work well and tie in with the overall themes of the game. Only a few stand out as being overly "gamey" - puzzles with no other apparent purpose than to add some padding - but these are the exception, not the rule.

At certain points in the game

the decisions Max makes become set in stone. Knowing the immediate consequences of decisions makes these moments quite powerful as you're forced to decide between short term gain and long term, unknown ramifications. Despite a few overly contrived puzzles, an at times rather painfully repetitive soundtrack and some pretty terrible lip-synch, *Life Is Strange: Episode 1 - Chrysalis* gets Dontnod's episodic adventure off to a very strong start. If only we could manipulate time a little so all five episodes were available now. **DANIEL WILKS**

WHY SHOULD I CARE

- You enjoy listening to the same song on repeat
- Time travel is a handy way to avoid studying
- You're an analogue person living in a digital world
- You're not cool or rich enough to be a trendsetter

OR TRY THIS



BACK TO THE FUTURE: THE GAME
TELLTALE GAMES • 2010

- Back to the Future
- No apocalyptic natural disaster



BIOSHOCK: INFINITE
IRRATIONAL GAMES • 2013

- Alternate timeline Revenge of the Jedi
- Booker, catch!



PRIMER
SHANE CURRATH • 2004

- Probably the smartest time travel story ever.
- It's all an impenetrable puzzle.

VERDICT A very strong first chapter of an intriguing new adventure series

8

Homeworld Remastered Collection

I have seen the neon vapour trails light up the debris fields of broken conquest

DEVELOPER GEARBOX SOFTWARE
PUBLISHER GEARBOX SOFTWARE
PRICE \$34.99 USD
AVAILABLE AT STEAM
www.homeworldremastered.com

If you play Homeworld and don't lose hours simply scrolling through a paused battle you're just not human.

Hello deep space, my old friend. In the decade and a half since Homeworld and its sequel graced my screen, I searched to recapture the magic feeling it imparted, a feeling I had long forgotten. Sins of a Solar Empire became my Homeworld substitute, filling the void when the need to glide through a paused star battle called, to live the excitement of unpausing and seeing my lovely fleet dash about, glowing engine trails painting a beautifully abstract picture of battle on my screen.

In the opening hour or so of the Homeworld Remastered experience, starting at the beginning with the first game, I was sad. Sins is better, much better, at everything, I thought. That much was clear, and was most evidently felt with the camera control. It's a fiddle to get the view you want quickly and precisely, and to move around freely the way you would like. Memories were returning. I remember feeling exactly the same frustration back in 1999. Oh noes.

But, oh my is it beautiful. The textures and effects are lush. Homeworld 2 Remastered looks even better, with sharper and more detailed surfaces. This could easily pass as a brand new game, today.

Playing on, the gaps in my recollection began to fill, and with good things. Things that are much, much better than Sins. It's the story, and the ongoing narrative that floods back,



“You will never feel the grind, you will always be prepared for radically different gaming”

reawakening true love for a great game. So free of high-energy over-amped excitement that prevails today, instead being a grand yet gently delivered tale of survival and discovery, rendered with just the right tone via black and white cut scenes and momentous mid-game twists.

The story envelops the missions harmoniously, usually breaking into the action as you're mid-battle with a dramatic development. Each mission has concise context, and that is translated into the objectives in each round. As the game evolves along, each new mission is very different from the last, and not in

a small way. You will never feel the grind, you will always be prepared for radically different gaming as each luscious hour passes.

They feel like proper sci-fi missions, too, as you, as fleet commander, slowly build your fleet which carries over to the next chapter. Playing is exciting like no game today challenges. The answer to good game design is not to throw more, louder, more explosive at the player. It is to do as Homeworld does, and open the door to immersion via gentle, civilised and intelligent story telling that is matched by game play that matches the story and the vibe of the universe perfectly,

instead of shoehorning some generic story crap in with even more by-number game play.

When Homeworld was first released it established a genre. Today, through Remastered, it resuscitates not only a genre left behind, but rekindles a style, pace and beautifully challenging variety tactical of space gaming that is essential in the modern landscape.

It is, by far, the highest quality HDification of an older game so far. With mod support it will go far and last for years more. Good job, Gearbox, and a tip of the hat to Relic, the Gearbox of their day. **BEN MANSILL**

WHY SHOULD I CARE

- It does happy things to your brain
- Spaceships like a Chris Foss 1970s paperback cover
- Tactical gaming fresher than most new titles

OR TRY THIS



SINS OF A SOLAR EMPIRE
IRONCLAD GAMES • 2008
● Polish and scope
● Story



SWORD OF THE STARS
KERBEROS PRODUCTIONS • 2006
● Fiddly bullshit
● Refinement



NEXUS: THE JUPITER INCIDENT
MITHIS ENTERTAINMENT • 2004
● Complexity
● Simplicity

VERDICT Mesmerising setting, story and battling. Just beautiful.

8



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Total War: Attila

Creative Assembly almost makes up for Rome 2

DEVELOPER CREATIVE ASSEMBLY
PUBLISHER SEGA
PRICE \$US44.99
AVAILABLE AT STEAM, RETAIL
www.totalwar.com

Okay, let me get this out of the way right here and up front. Yes, we're one of many Total War fans that felt that Rome 2 was easily the worst of the series, and generally a poor game in its right. So, hopefully you can trust us when we say that Attila, the Napoleon to Empire, as it were, is a far superior game.

It's one you will actually want to keep playing, whereas, for a lot of people Rome 2 was un-fun and a lot of hard work. From pacing to setting and atmosphere, to the balance of units and the flow of the game's signature real-time combat, Attila is, if not a great Total War game, it is at least a very good one.

Which is not to say it is without its flaws, but we'll get to them.

The game is set in a very fascinating period, which Creative Assembly has used to offer up some quite rich gameplay options. In the fourth century, the mighty Roman Empire has split into two, much weaker Eastern and Western Empires, while around its borders nation and city states, northern barbarians, ancient eastern civilisations, and travelling hordes all array themselves. This is the opening of the Dark Ages, and while many historians may protest that term in light of the cultural richness of the period, Creative has grasped the phrase with both hands, and crafted a game where the darkness really is descending.

The Total War games have always been visually impressive,

and while Attila is not the prettiest – that would be Shogun 2, with its highly florally-inspired colour palette – it is possibly the most artistic. Even sunny days are intensely gloomy, and as the sun sets on the battlefields you fight over, shadows lengthen into wraith-like gloom. Most strikingly – and this also has a terrifying mechanical effect – fire stands out like some bright and dangerous thing, making flaming arrows, burning buildings, and torch-bearing troops more visually bold than ever before.

Attila uses a fire motif even on the strategic map. Here, it's possible for invading armies to lay waste to entire regions, at

towers, smoke from the city and buildings, and streams of burning arrows and shot from siege engines – downright spectacular.


Thankfully this visual fidelity is matched by a huge improvement in AI skill, and overall pacing. Rome 2's battles could be over very fast, with units breaking and running before you can do anything about it, but Attila has slowed things down a little. It still doesn't feel quite right, but there's a weight to the fights now that feels much more natural, and is much easier on the player trying to control them. Similarly, units are more likely to rally after breaking off, so there's a bit more flexibility.

This is almost essential to the game, though. With nations like the Saxons, who consistently raid England until they drive the Romans out, and of course the pre-cursor Viking tribes, not including this kind of brutal raiding would be an egregious oversight.

Speaking of factions, there really is an amazing mix. There aren't that many, but the breadth of gameplay on offer is unique. At one end you've got the aforementioned Saxons, for instance, who start with two large armies, and a single region; at the other, you've got the Roman Empires, and the eastern forces of the Sassanids. Each represents a very different flavour, from the roaming, landless Vandals to the empire-building Franks and Saxons. But playing as the Romans is the real heart of the game, I think. You're outnumbered, lack any working financial base, and you generally start losing from turn one – it's brutal, but it's also really quite engaging watching your Empire fall.

No wonder Creative has set those campaigns as representing Legendary difficulty!

Overall, though some systems – like the nearly impenetrable trade mechanics, and the still tacked-on feeling provincial system – still don't feel quite right, Attila is a massive improvement in almost every sense.

Makes us feel pretty damn keen for Total Warhammer. DAVID HOLLINGWORTH 

“Thankfully this visual fidelity is matched by a huge improvement in AI skill, and overall pacing”

which point its lush forests and fields are reducing to ash and glowing embers. Watching as a tribe like the Huns or Vandals march across the map, literally burning as they go, can give you quite the intimation of what those times must have felt like.

But fire is also now more powerful on the tactical map too. Some units will set fire to buildings as they pass, and as buildings catch alight in towns, their neighbours are not far behind. Even trees can be set alight. This makes any battle something to behold, but it makes sieges – with burning

Otherwise, battles are what you've come to expect from Total War – unit placement is key, as is exploring the enemy's flanks and securing your own, while holding a strong line.

But this quite the challenge, now, as Attila's AI seems to have had a major overhaul. Sure, its initial deployments aren't all that clever, but it's very good now at sending cavalry units on flanking attacks, which can be quite dangerous. This newfound skill is also apparent on the strategic map, where the AI is now more than happy to launch seaborne raids and attacks.

WHY SHOULD I CARE

- What has Rome ever done for you?
- Burning things is fun.
- You were bitterly disappointed in Rome 2
- You like being outnumbered

OR TRY THIS



CRUSADER KINGS
PARADOX • 2012

- For those who like SERIOUS depth
- Tactically very abstract



ROME: TOTAL WAR
CREATIVE ASSEMBLY • 2004

- Still popular and well mod-supported
- Graphically long in the tooth



ENDLESS LEGEND
APLITUDE STUDIOS • 2014

- If you prefer a bit of fantasy in your strategy
- Can be a bit hard to grok

VERDICT Relax – this Total War game is a return to form for Creative Assembly, with a very engaging setting.

8



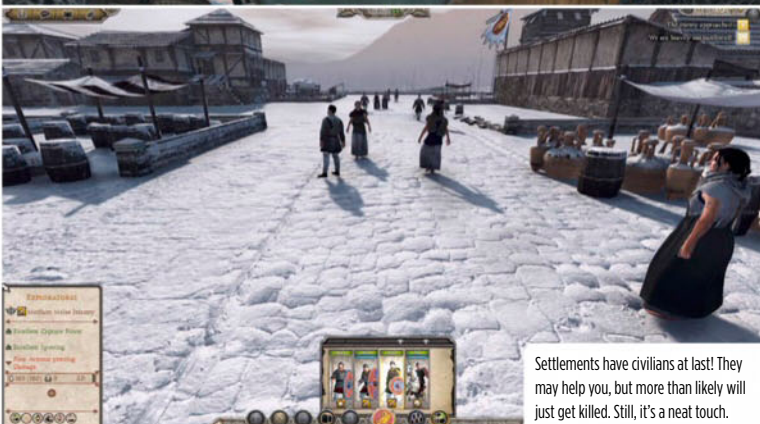
FOR ROOOOMMMME!!!!

1. The unit cards are now much more useful for recognising units. No pictograms!
2. Battle events pop here, and are far less intrusive, and can be clicked upon to see where it has happened.
3. Settlements are protected by towers, that fire burning arrows. Very effective.
4. There's a lot of info you can pick up from the unit flags on the map, which show type, health, morale, ammunition, and more.
5. If you squint, you can actually see all the hopes of the once mighty Roman Empire failing right here.



Barbarian hordes are likely to attack towns and then bugger off.

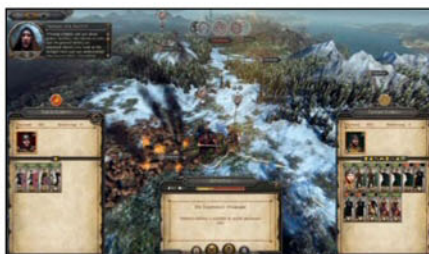
As always, the strategic map is very pretty - except when every enemy army is bigger than yours...



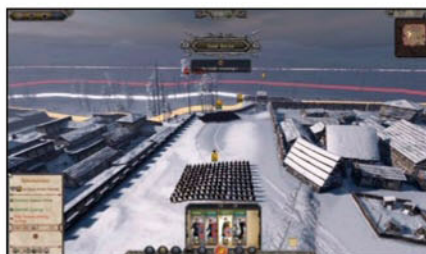
Settlements have civilians at last! They may help you, but more than likely will just get killed. Still, it's a neat touch.



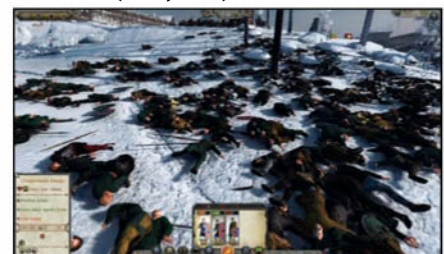
THE (LATE, LATE) ROMAN WAY OF WAR



1. Get attacked by EVERYONE



2. Do your best with what few units you have.



3. Go down swinging.

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Outliers

Living on the edge of tech

As the Tech Editor at PC PowerPlay it's easy to get caught up in the performance offered by the fastest goodies. Half the time I get to use these high-end products over extended periods without having to buy them. And if I can't borrow one, I'm happy to use my 30-something, single with no kids salary to spend \$600 or so on a GPU. Yet Valve's hardware survey shows that I'm on the outlier of hardware purchases; there aren't many gamers who are happy to spend a couple of grand a year on PC hardware.

It turns out that you guys have much more important things to spend your cash on. This is why cards like NVIDIA's GTX 960 are so highly anticipated. The vast majority of PC gamers can only spend around \$300 or so on a graphics card, which is the sweet spot of performance vs price that NVIDIA's latest mainstream offering is targeting. For once NVIDIA is well behind the 8-ball on this price segment; it's usually got competitively priced cards targeting this segment within a month or two of AMD. Yet it's taken six months for NVIDIA to roll out the GTX 960, which is why I've spent four pages examining this new chipset. Can it keep up with AMD's offerings, especially considering Team Red has been slashing and burning prices like there's no tomorrow? You'll have to read the GTX 960 feature to find out.

Bennett Ring
Tech Editor
bring@next.com.au



Our Power Award is given to products that are best in class no matter your budget.



Our Smart Buy Award goes to products that balance performance with price tag.

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PCPP TESTBENCH

CPU

INTEL I7 3770K
www.intel.com.au



MOBO

GIGABYTE Z77X-UD3H
www.gigabyte.com.au



SSD

CORSAIR NEUTRON
www.corsair.com



RAM

8GB PATRIOT DDR3 2,133MHz
www.patriotmemory.com



GPU

RADEON HD 7970
www.amd.com



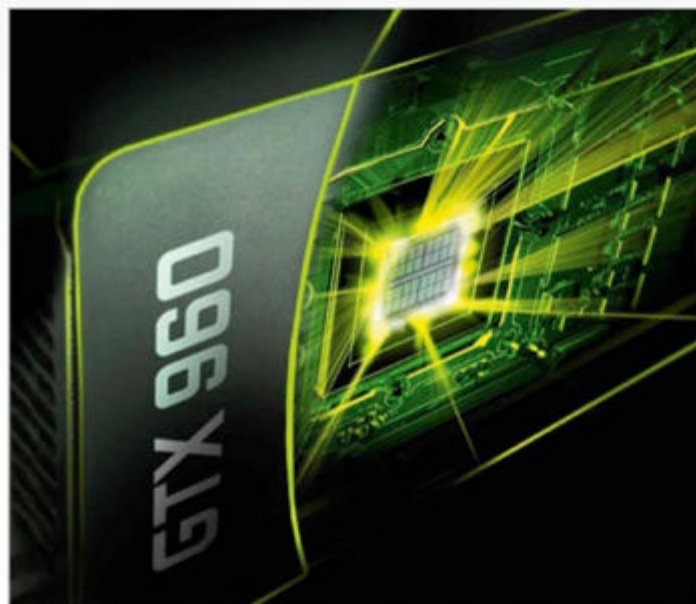
PSU

CORSAIR AX860I
www.corsair.com



DISPLAY

DELL U2711
www.dell.com.au



PCPP CASE ROUNDUP

It's time to put **BENNETT RING** back in his box.

Pity the poor PC case. When building a new gaming box, we all get excited about the GPU and CPU that will be powering its interior, yet little thought is paid to the chassis that will house everything. Selecting a new case usually boils down to figuring out how much of your budget is left over, and then picking something that doesn't look totally ugly. Yet the case is probably one of the components that will last the longest, so here at PC PowerPlay we think it's worth spending a little more thought on which case your components will call home. We've sourced seven of the latest PC cases priced below \$200 to see which one deserves to live in your gaming den.

CASING THE JOINT

When it comes to selecting a case, the very first thing to consider is the size that you'll need. A tower case is the standard black box that we're all familiar with, packing enough interior space to hold an ATX motherboard. Most tower cases also have room for a radiator installation, but it's worth double checking once you've confirmed how big your radiator will be. Midi-towers are slightly smaller versions of a tower, yet still have just enough room to squeeze an ATX board inside. Small Form Factor cases are much smaller, and only support mini-ITX or microATX boards; as such they're usually used for Home Theatre PCs as they often don't have the room for a discrete graphics card.



“The final facet to examine is build quality, and it's here that your budget will determine what's available”

MISSING IN ACTION

You're probably wondering why some of the biggest names in the case making business don't have products featured in this roundup. It's not that we didn't invite them, but unfortunately Lian Li and CoolerMaster decided they didn't want to participate in the roundup. CoolerMaster explained that it hadn't released any new cases recently. Lian Li didn't offer an explanation at this time. Corsair is also missing in action, but this was due to a shipping issue that coincided with Chinese New Year. We will, of course, be reviewing products from Lian Li, CoolerMaster and Corsair in coming issues.

If you're looking to build a machine with a huge eATX motherboard, you're going to need to get an extra-large case.

If you game with headphones, there's probably no need to look for a case with soundproofing. On the other hand, if you're like us and game with surround sound speakers, a silent case is highly desirable, as it'll stop the whine of the CPU and GPU fans from driving you crazy. Extreme overclockers and those with steamy components (cough AMD GPUs cough) should look for a case that has excellent airflow, usually provided by two or three case fans. The rest of us don't need to be too concerned with running a wind farm under our desk.

The final facet to examine is build quality, and it's here that your budget will determine what's available. Pay more and you can expect a sturdy critter built from thicker steel or aluminium, with a generally higher quality finish. At the budget end of the spectrum you'll find much more plastic used throughout the case, and the sides will often be a thin grill material that is cheap to make but blocks absolutely no sound.

Keep these points in mind when buying your next case and you'll end up with just the right model for your needs. There's a bewildering array of cases on the market, and we sourced six of the best to see what \$200 or less buys these days.

BitFenix Neos Window

BitFenix doesn't break the bank

PRICE \$69
www.bitfenix.com

While most of our cases were in the \$100 to \$200 range, BitFenix sent us this budget battler as it's one of the newest cases in its extensive range. At just seventy bucks, midi-towers don't get much cheaper than this, yet BitFenix has managed to deliver a box that doesn't feel horribly built.

Despite the low cost, the vast majority of this case appears to be made from steel. The front fascia is the exception, using black plastic instead, but it's inlaid with a metal grill that stops it looking like a huge hunk of plastic. Obviously this won't help too much with sound proofing. A small Perspex window adorns the left side, but there's also a windowless model for those who like to keep their innards hidden. The front lip of the top hosts the various I/O ports, including a headphone jack, microphone input, alongside one USB 2.0 and one USB 3.0 port.

Heading inside reveals there's just enough room for an ATX motherboard within, but there's probably not quite enough space for a radiator as well. BitFenix has employed a fully tool-less design throughout, including the twin drive bays. One is built to hold three SSDs, while the other plays host to three 3.5 inch bays. The mounting mechanism is extremely rudimentary, and lacks any of the rubber grommets usually used to limit vibration and noise. Two 120mm fans help push air through the case, with one on the front, the other at the rear.

When compared to the NZXT S340, which is only \$27 more expensive, the Neos Window doesn't quite make the cut. If every last cent in your build needs to be accounted for, it'll do the job, but we think the S340 is worth spending a little extra for. **BENNETT RING**



- Decent build quality
- Tool-less design
- Twin fans

- Average drive bay mounts
- Only one USB 3.0 port
- Not very soundproof

VERDICT Bargain hunters might dig this case, but we prefer the similarly priced S340.

6

NZXT S340

Beauty needn't cost the Earth

PRICE \$97
www.nzxt.com

When we first checked the price of this case, we did a double take; how could such a stunning, well-constructed case cost less than \$100? Closer examination revealed a couple of minor flaws, yet we still can't figure out how NZXT delivers such a premium product at this price.

Let's start with the unique design. The front of the case is a plain white slab, as there's no space for an optical drive. Twin USB 3.0 ports adorn the I/O port on the top edge, alongside the usual headphone and microphone jacks. The gap you can see on the top of the case is used purely for airflow. There's no plastic evident on the exterior of the case, instead using thick steel coated in a luxuriously deep coat of glossy paint, offset by the matte black top. It's a stunner, to be sure. A huge Perspex window reveals the incredibly tidy

interior, which uses a clever cable hiding bar to easily hide those messy leads. It might be have the svelte dimensions of a midi-tower case, but there's room inside for an ATX motherboard along with a radiator. Two 120mm fans are included

The PSU and hard drive bays are tucked away in an isolated compartment at the bottom of the case, once again removing any untidy sights from the view of the window. Our only concern is a lack of space for hard drives, with three 3.5 inch and twin 2.5 inch bays all that is included.

We're quite simply amazed at the build and design quality of the S340. Once again NZXT reaffirms why this classy brand is worthy of your attention, yet does so at a ridiculously low price. **BENNETT RING**



- Staggeringly beautiful
- Quality finish
- Clever compartmentalisation

- Not enough hard drive bays
- No room for an Optical Drive

VERDICT This is our budget case of choice, combining killer looks with clever design at an affordable price

10

Thermaltake Core V51

One for the cooling obsessed

PRICE \$129
www.thermaltake.com.au

Thermaltake claims this is a mid-tower case, but it looks almost as big as a full-tower to us; there's a reason it can host a ginormous eATX motherboard. It measures 54cm by 24cm by 56cm, so is only suitable for those who have room for a fully-fledged tower. Thanks to the large size there's plenty of room inside for anything you can imagine, with a whopping eight expansion slots. It'll also host basically any of Thermaltake's newish range of radiators, or up to nine fans, three of which are included. In case you hadn't noticed, the Core V51 seems obsessed with cooling.

The use of mesh panelling on the front and top, along with a wire grill at the rear, means it'll be a breeze to maintain strong airflow through this case. There is a flipside to this though, as the grills won't block any

sound from escaping from the interior of the case. Speaking of the interior, five drive bays can host either 3.5 or 2.5 inch drives, and the tool-less clamping mechanism is both effective and sturdy. Another two 5.25 inch drive bays are accessible from the front of the case. Twin USB 3.0 ports sit above these, along with the usual sound ports.

Thermaltake has delivered a huge case with excellent cooling support at a tidy price, yet it doesn't exude the same attention to detail or build quality of the likes of NZXT. Still, if you need to build a hulking tower of high-performance cooling, you could do a lot worse than the Core V51.

BENNETT RING



- Plenty of room
- Excellent cooling potential
- Modular drive bays

- Average build quality and finish
- Poor soundproofing

VERDICT If you just want something big, affordable and ready for extreme cooling, the V51 delivers.

8

Aerocool DS 200

The price of silence

PRICE \$179
www.aerocool.com.tw

What price would you pay for a whisper-quiet PC? Aerocool thinks you'll be happy to pay close to \$200 for the privilege of not having to listen to whining GPU fans during that especially tense section in Alien Isolation, but is it really necessary to pay so much?

If you do require absolute silence from your case, don't buy the Window version of this box, as it is lacking any of the noise-cancelling material on the left side panel. Regardless of which version you end up buying, there's also no noise-cancelling material on the top of the case; instead a thin layer of rubberised plastic is all that stands between you and the incessant hum of the interior. A replacement top is included if you'd like to install a radiator, but that will make noise pollution even worse.

The top of the case also plays host

to twin USB 3.0 and twin USB 2.0 ports, but it's the large LCD screen that is most intriguing. This is actually a fan speed controller, and can handle up to a total combined draw of 25W worth of fans. Several temperature probes are also included, allowing the user to monitor internal temps via the LCD screen. The interior has room for twin 5.25 inch external-facing drives, another five 3.5 inch bays and twin 2.5 inch bays. A total of seven expansion slots round out the specs.

Considering the premium price, we're a little concerned at the amount of plastic used throughout, not to mention the lack of sound proofing. It's definitely a unique looking critter, but there are better silent cases out there.

BENNETT RING



- Fan speed controller
- Some noise proofing
- Unique looks

- Several panels have no noise proofing
- Lots of plastic

VERDICT Sadly the DS 200 misses the mark, lacking the wall to wall sound proofing necessary to deliver a truly silent tower.

6

Phanteks Enthoo EVOLV

Built like the proverbial brick outhouse

PRICE \$169
www.phanteks.com

With one of the highest price tags in the roundup, we were a little surprised when we realised the EVOLV was actually a micro tower. That means it only has room inside for a mini-ITX or microATX motherboard, which automatically limits its potential. Cases of this size usually sell for well below the hundred dollar mark, so why is the EVOLV so darn expensive? Two words: build quality.

To put it bluntly, this thing is built like a Sherman tank. The steel frame is clad in thick aluminium, and we mean thick. Each panel can be removed without requiring the removal of thumbscrews, as it uses a clipping mechanism to keep each one in place. The sheer depth of each surface will make this quite a potent noise-killer, though there are a few gaps in the front fascia. Speaking of which, there's no cut-out for an optical drive, while the

twin USB 3.0 and sound inputs reside on the right side of the case. Heading inside reveals a separated PSU compartment, along with a removable drive bay. The small size means there's only room for four expansion slots, yet it can host a lengthy 318mm graphics card if need be. A total of eight drive bays are squeezed inside, as are two fans, with a huge 200mm beast strapped to the front.

There's no denying that the build quality and finish on this case is simply impeccable, but it's rather expensive considering its dimensions. Still, if you want the ultimate in durability, along with a rather unique aesthetic, the EVOLV will happily keep your components safe no matter what you throw at it. **BENNETT RING** 🇬🇧



- Incredibly sturdy
- Excellent attention to detail
- Striking looks

- Very expensive for the size
- No optical drive port

VERDICT Weighing more than cases twice its size, this rugged little brute is built to last.

7

Fractal Design Define R5

The perfect case?

PRICE \$150
www.fractal-design.com

We're going to end our roundup with a doozy of a case, in the form of the Define R5. This is basically the perfect PC case for a mid-range gaming PC. Here's why.

For starters, the entire case exudes that feeling of top notch build quality that certain other brands lack. The finish is perfectly smooth, everything fits together snugly, and metal is used throughout, apart from the front door. This folds open to reveal twin optical drive bays and a lengthy fan grill, and like both the sides, is lined with thick, high quality sound absorbing material. If you want to install a fan over your GPUs, a small piece of the sound proofing can be lifted out to mount a side-fan. Of all the cases reviewed here, this one definitely has the best sound proofing on offer.

Twin USB 3.0 ports sit next to twin USB 2.0 ports, along with the

usual sound jacks. Heading inside the case reveals a modular drive bay system that allows the ten different drive bays to be configured in various arrangements. Each drive bay is made from metal, so won't snap even after repeated drive removals, unlike the cheap plastic used elsewhere. Twin 140mm fans come installed, and there's even a fan-speed controller, though it's rather primitive compared to others we've seen. Seven expansion slots provide plenty of options for full-sized ATX motherboards.

Our only concern is the use of plastic on the front door; apart from this minor quibble we love everything about the Define R5. Delivering an excellent build quality, a well-designed interior and excellent sound proofing, this is the perfect home for your next performance PC. **BENNETT RING** 🇬🇧



- Excellent soundproofing
- Quality finish throughout
- Lots of drive bays

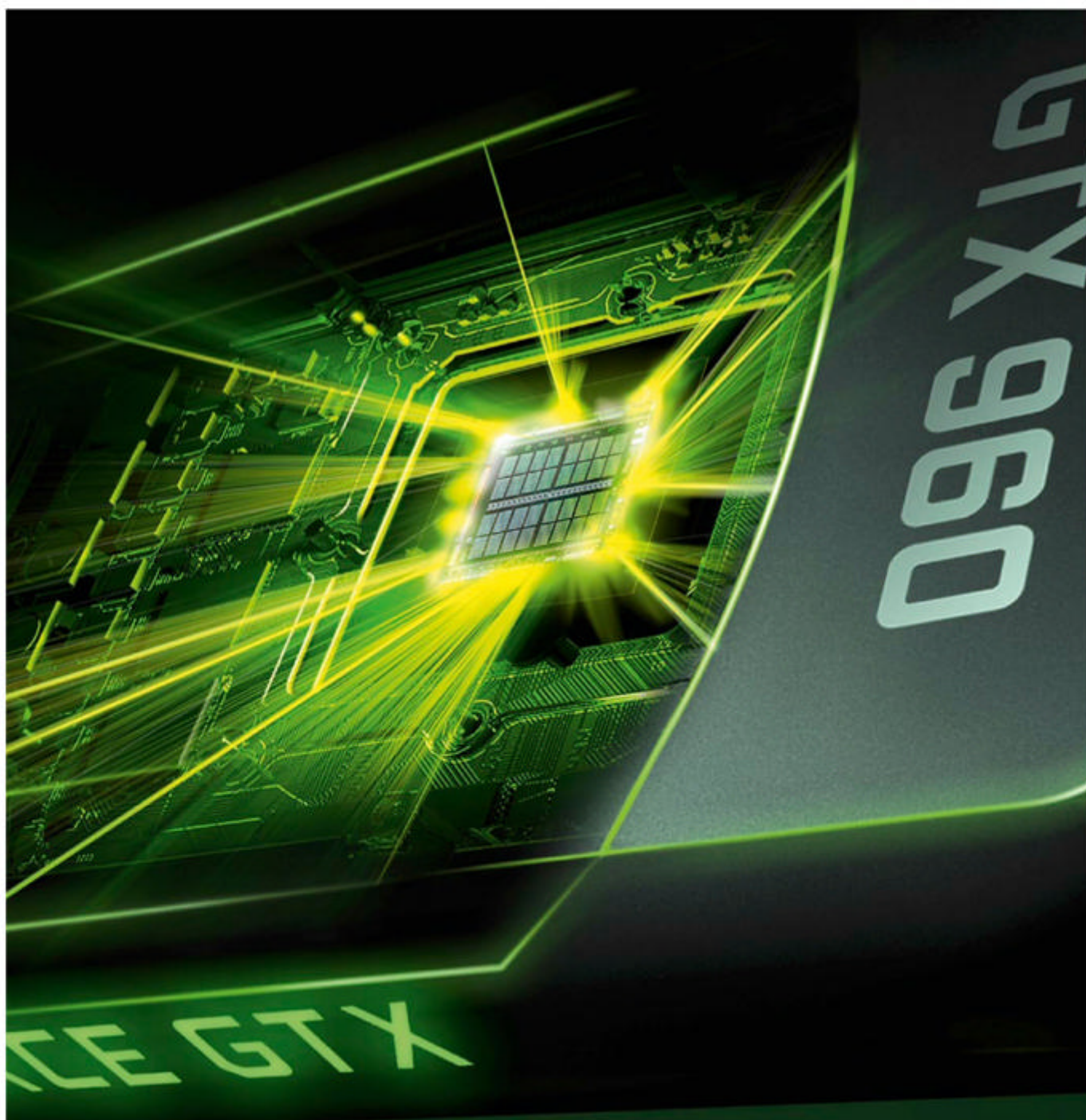
- Plastic front door

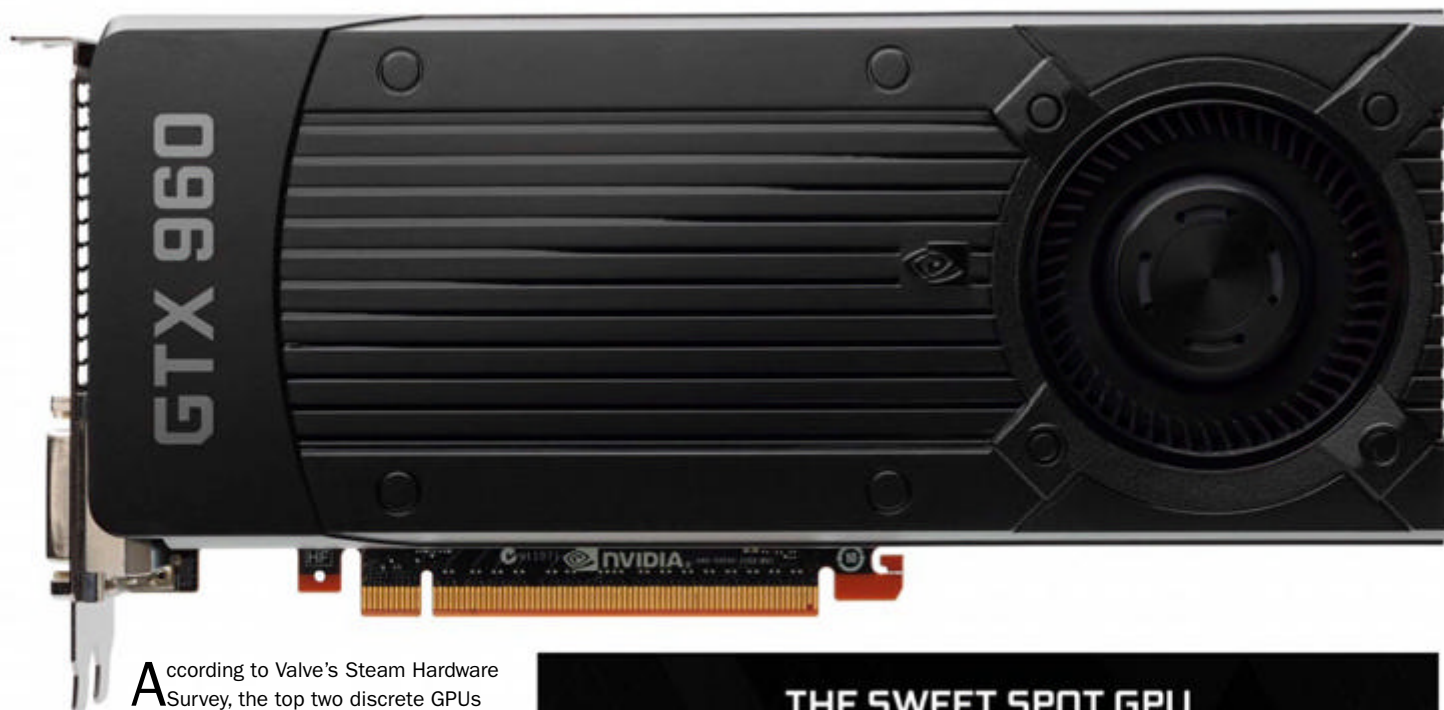
VERDICT The Define R5 is simply our favourite PC case for a mainstream gaming build.

10

THE SWEET SPOT

NVIDIA's new GTX 960 brings Maxwell to the mainstream. **BENNETT RING**





According to Valve's Steam Hardware Survey, the top two discrete GPUs used by PC gamers just happen to be NVIDIA's GTX 660 and GTX 760. There's a good reason for this; costing around the \$300 mark at launch, both of these graphics cards captured the sweet spot of performance versus price. Unfortunately for NVIDIA, it hasn't had a new product at this price point since the GTX 760 launched way back in June 2013, an eternity in technology timelines. It's taken almost two years for the successor to one of NVIDIA's most popular products to arrive, in the form of the GeForce GTX 960. With the help of ASUS, we took two of these cards for a spin in both single GPU and dual-GPU configurations, to see whether the latest offering can fill the shoes of NVIDIA's most affordable performance product.

MAXWELL GETS SMART

While the GTX 760 was built upon NVIDIA's Kepler architecture, the GTX 960 makes the leap to Maxwell, NVIDIA's latest GPU design. It's actually Maxwell Mark 2 to be precise, as the design has had several subtle improvements over the initial version of Maxwell that first showed up in the GTX 750. The latest iteration of Maxwell first arrived in the flagship GTX 980 component, which managed to outpace AMD's R9 290X while also delivering a much cooler, power-efficient product. At the heart of the GTX 980 lay the GM204 GPU, and cards based around this chip still fetch prices in excess of \$700. The same GM204 chip had some of its internals disabled to deliver the more affordable GTX 970 piece, which offered much of the performance of its bigger brother at a more palatable price. However, these cards are still going for around \$470, making them a stretch for those on tight budgets. Enter the GTX 960, with prices starting around \$280, and



stretching up to \$350 depending on the model chosen. The GTX 960 we're reviewing here is the ASUS STRIX-GTX960-DC20C-2GD5, which carries a street price of \$325.

Powering all GTX 960s is the new GM206 chip, which appears to be the GM204 found in the GTX 980, but cut in half. NVIDIA has often aimed for its X60 products to be roughly half the chip found in its high-end X80 products, but it has always over-provisioned several areas of the design, meaning performance is generally better than half the speed of the high-end. Yet with the GTX 960 we see a chip design that is built around precisely half of the functioning components of the GTX 980, which could see the GTX 960 offering the least impressive performance for any X60 product when compared to its brethren.

The CUDA cores found in Maxwell are the worker bees in the silicon hive that is this GPU design, and the GTX 960 has just 1024 of them, exactly half of the 2048 found in the GTX 980, while the GTX 970 ships with 1664. The number of texture units has also been halved, dropping to 64 in the GTX 960 down

from 128 in the GTX 980; meanwhile the GTX 970 sits much closer to the 980, with 104. The number of ROPs has also been carved in twain, down to 32 from the 64 in the GTX 980, the same number found in the GTX 970.

The axe has also been taken to the GTX 960's memory bus, dropping from the 256-bit width of the GTX 970 and 980 to just 128-bits. Thankfully the memory speed remains the same across all three products, at 7GHz, but the halving of the width will have a dramatic impact at higher resolutions and anti-aliasing settings. Onboard memory has also been cut, down to just 2GB, half that found in its faster brothers, and this is particularly worrying. Over the last year we've started to see PC games easily eating up to 3GB of onboard video memory, and these games will see severe hitching on the GTX 960, as the card will need to fetch data from the PC's system memory to fill its buffer.

As for the frequency of the GPU, the GTX 960 comes with a base speed of just 1050MHz, but what really matters is the Boost Clock speed. This is the speed that the GPU

increases to while under load, and in the GTX 960 it's set to 1178MHz, the exact same speed of the GTX 970. GTX 980 owners once again get the fastest piece here, with a Boost Clock speed of 1216MHz.

With so many cuts to the GPU, it's no surprise to see the total transistor count drop from the 5.2 billion found in the GTX 970 down to 2.94 billion in the GTX 960.

This helps to explain why the thermal output of the card has dropped, down to just 120W. This is a modest decrease from the 170W of the GTX 760, and makes it one of the coolest performance parts on

the market. Those looking for a graphics card that can operate under thermally challenging conditions, such as in a Small Form Factor PC, or who want the quietest cooling around, will benefit from the drop in TDP.

While the nuts and bolts of the GM204 chip that powers the GTX 960 are interesting, most gamers will probably care more about the various features supported by the card. As usual, NVIDIA has delivered plenty of extras that help differentiate its products from AMD's, beyond mere performance increases.

NVIDIA'S GRAB BAG OF GOODIES

PC Gamers have long been using downsampling to remove jaggies in games that don't support anti-aliasing, and we've even published guides on how to do this in PC PowerPlay. For those who missed the article, it's basically a way of rendering the game at a resolution higher than that supported by the display. For example, it's possible to render

a game at 2560 x 1440, yet output this on a 1920 x 1080 screen. In the past this required the user to set up custom resolutions for their display, which required a little trial and error to find the best results, but NVIDIA's new Dynamic Super Resolution (DSR) makes this a cinch. The user simply selects the custom resolutions they'd like to try, and hits apply. Enabling DSR is very taxing on the GPU

though, especially with the GTX 960's narrow memory bus, so it won't be as useful here as it is on the higher end products. It should still be usable on slightly older titles though. It's worth

noting that DSR is enabled on all NVIDIA products.

A feature that is unique to Maxwell is the addition of Multi-Frame Anti-Aliasing, or MFAA for short. This is a new type of jaggie-removal that aims to deliver the same image quality as 4XMSAA, with a 30% performance boost. We tested this on a couple of games and found the image did indeed look very close to the sharp lines offered by 4XMSAA, but the performance increase was around 20%. For those who demand an anti-aliased image, the implementation of MFAA offers real performance gains, and it's supported by nearly all DX10 and DX11 games.

Like all recent NVIDIA products, the GTX 960 can power G-sync enabled displays, allowing owners of these pricey monitors to run their games at frame rates of 40 or so without any noticeable stuttering or judder. This is especially relevant to the GTX 960, as it doesn't quite have the performance to

guarantee the 60 frames per second required to deliver a smooth, v-sync locked experience. Unfortunately these displays are still rarer than hen's teeth, while also costing significantly more than standard displays; hopefully we'll see the standard proliferate in 2015.

PhysX support is also a given, but given that a single GTX 970 can suffer slowdown when this is enabled in certain games, we don't feel that the GTX 960 has the performance necessary to make this a realistic feature. Thankfully Shadowplay is something this card can handle with ease; NVIDIA's proprietary game capture software only slows performance by around 5 to 10%, even when capturing at 1080p/60Hz.

With all of these features presented via the intuitive GeForce Experience interface, NVIDIA definitely has the edge of AMD when it comes to value-added features. But what about the thing that ultimately matters – performance? Let's take a look to see how the GTX 960 compares to AMD's most closely priced rival, the R9 280X.

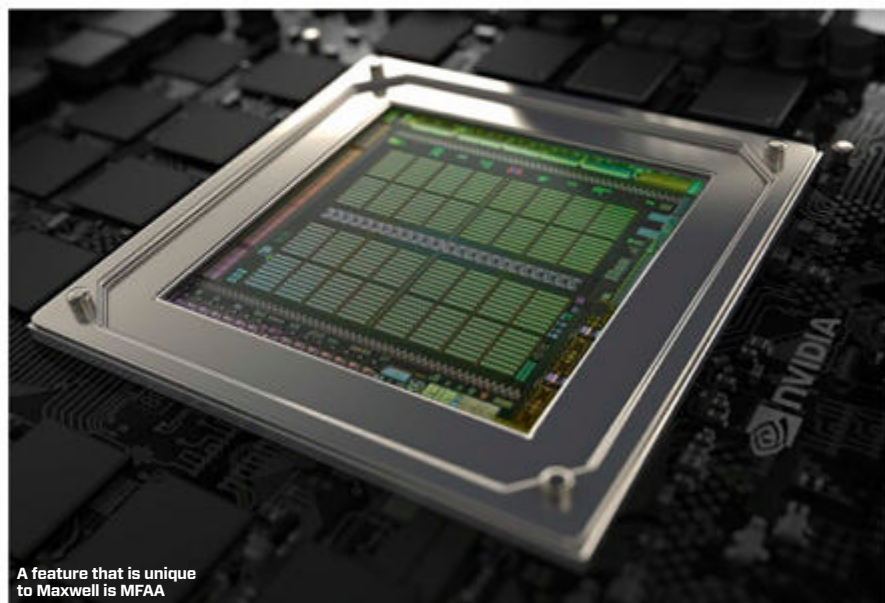
THE HARD NUMBERS

We should point out that most GTX 960s currently on the market have had factory overclocks applied to them. Case in point is the ASUS STRIX-GTX960-DC20C-2GD5, which ships with a default Boost Clock speed of 1317MHz, a modest 8% increase. ASUS has stuck with the standard GTX 960 PCB, and the entire product measures 210mm in length. The twin-fan cooler uses ASUS' DirectCU design, and also incorporates its 0dB fan control; below a certain temperature, the fans on the card do not move. We found that they stayed off while using the desktop, only kicking into life once we fired up our benchmarks. A single six-pin power connector provides the juice, and NVIDIA recommends a 400W PSU as a minimum. ASUS has stuck with the standard suite of GTX 960 outputs, comprised of three DisplayPorts, one HDMI 2.0 and a single DVI-I.

We benchmark the ASUS GTX 960 in a testbed powered by Intel's I7 4970K, to ensure the CPU wasn't the bottleneck. This was paired with 8GB of DDR3 1800 memory, housed in the ASUS H97-PRO GAMER motherboard, while a clean Windows 8.1 installation was hosted on a Corsair Neutron SSD. All benchmarks were run at 1920 x 1080, with most settings on Ultra. PhysX was disabled, to ensure an apples to apples comparison between the GTX 960 and R9 280X.

When run in single GPU mode, our benchmarks showed that the GTX 960 doesn't quite have what it takes to best AMD's R9 280X, coming equal in two of the tests, and lagging behind in the other two. To our surprise, SLI scaling wasn't very impressive across several of the games, though we did

“NVIDIA definitely has the edge of AMD when it comes to value-added features”



A feature that is unique to Maxwell is MFAA



GTX 960 BENCHMARKS

GRID Autosport - 1920x1080

■ Min FPS ■ Avg FPS

Single ASUS Strix GTX 960	67	88
Twin ASUS Strix GTX 960	67	94
AMD Radeon R9 280X	66	88

Thief - 1920x1080

■ Min FPS ■ Avg FPS

Single ASUS Strix GTX 960	33	61
Twin ASUS Strix GTX 960	9	69
AMD Radeon R9 280X	56	75

Metro 2033 - 1920x1080

■ Min FPS ■ Avg FPS

Single ASUS Strix GTX 960	23	54
Twin ASUS Strix GTX 960	26	76
AMD Radeon R9 280X	4	54

3DMark - Firestrike

■ Score ■ Graphics score

Single ASUS Strix GTX 960	6855	7813
Twin ASUS Strix GTX 960	11255	15280
AMD Radeon R9 280X	7646	8518

see a sharp performance increase in the demanding Metro 2033 benchmark.

Considering the R9 280X is retailing for the exact same price as the ASUS STRIX-GTX960-DC20C-2GD5, we have to conclude that shoppers with \$300 to spend are better served by AMD's product. The GTX 960 might run cooler and have more interesting features, but it's unquestionably the slower product of the two. It's not far off though, so if NVIDIA can trim the price down to \$275 or so, the GTX 960 will become the better value proposition. Until that time, AMD will have the advantage in one of the most popular GPU price segments. **PC**

- Solid performance
- Runs cool
- Excellent overclocking performance
- Slower than similarly priced AMD models

VERDICT NVIDIA has delivered a capable mainstream product, but AMD's offering at this price point is too good to pass up.

7

GPU

ASUS Matrix Platinum GTX 980 (MATRIX-GTX980-P-4GD5)

Built by overclockers, for overclockers

PRICE \$1039
www.asus.com.au

By now you probably know that NVIDIA's GeForce GTX 980 is our favourite GPU for high-end gaming. Whack two of these in your system and 4K gaming isn't an unrealistic expectation. NVIDIA knows gamers love it, which is why the price of graphics cards based on this chip remain rather lofty, still hovering around the \$800 price point. This makes it one of the most expensive graphics cards available, but ASUS has delivered an even higher premium version of this premium product. The Matrix Platinum GTX 980 sells for over a grand, but there's a good reason for the price rise.

"Designed by overclockers, for overclockers" is the mantra behind this product's design. It has every feature a serious overclocker could ever desire, starting with a seriously high-end power supply. GPUs pushed to the absolute limit need the cleanest, most stable power supply around, which is why ASUS has endowed this card with a ridiculous 14 phase power supply using DIGI+VRM for rapid, accurate adjustments in voltage. Power is fed via twin 8-pin power connectors, with an additional 4-pin Molex connector used to power the card's defrosting feature. Several voltage measuring points are easily accessible on the rear of the card, allowing quick and accurate voltage monitoring.

This is a card that has been designed to operate at the chilly temperatures offered by liquid nitrogen cooling. A small switch on the card enables the defrosting loop, which removes any icing from the memory, lowering the risk of cold bugs. Unfortunately we weren't able to test this feature, but this card is also a demon when overclocking on air. The huge DirectCU II cooler is based around five 10mm heatpipes that removes heat from the GPU and

dissipates it to the large cooling shroud. Twin fans are help to remove the heat, and one uses a new inner radial blower to improve performance without increasing fan noise. ASUS claims this cooler is up to three times quieter than the stock cooler, and our sound meter pegged it at just 43dB under load, making this one of the quietest GTX 980s we've tested. A glowing "Republic of Gamers" logo on the outside edge of the card changes colour to indicate GPU load, which will be a nice addition for those with large case windows.

ASUS has obviously given this product a small factory overclock, with the Boost Clock speed increasing from the default of 1216MHz up to 1342MHz. Memory speed is at stock out of the box, but we managed to top it out at 7960MHz before glitching started to show up in games. Unfortunately the GPU is tied to a very strict power increase of just 38mV due to NVIDIA regulations, which limits what this card can do without voltage modifications. Using this amount of extra voltage, we managed to reach a maximum stable

Boost Clock of just 1440MHz, which is on par with other GTX 980s.

If you're not going to be dousing this card in water or liquid nitrogen, the raft of extra features on this card simply aren't necessary, making the price increase hard to swallow. However, if you're on the hunt for world records or aren't afraid to do a little voltage modification to power up your water cooled system, the Matrix Platinum GTX 980 is a tantalising product packed with all the features you could ever ask for. **BENNETT RING** 🇬🇧



- Excellent power supply
- Very quiet air cooler
- Defrost feature

• No big speed increase on air

VERDICT This graphics card really needs LN2 or water cooling to stretch its powerful wings. Non-overclockers needn't apply.

9

DISPLAY

Philips BDM3470UP Display

As wide as it gets

PRICE \$999
www.philips.com.au



Over the last year I've started to see more Ultra-Wide displays making their way into stores, and the latest of these boundary-benders is this behemoth from Philips. Measuring 34 inches across, it's a desk-spanning beast that should offer gamers an immersive retina-filling experience. Let's take a look to see if this display can overcome some of the limitations I found with earlier Ultra-Wide displays.

The included stand is excellent, with height, swivel, tilt and rotation all offered. The wide range of vertical motion allows for perfect height adjustment, and it also rotates through 90 degrees, just in case you want an incredibly long vertical display. The screen's bezel is extremely thin, at just 2.5mm, although the screen doesn't quite reach it, with a 9mm border between the edge of the display and the bezel. The on-screen display is accessed via a series of buttons on the bottom left – touch controls would have been a nice feature at this price. There's a wide range of colour adjustment options, including individual hue and saturation for each colour.

Input options are comprehensive, with video fed into the display via

VGA, DVI-Dual Link, Display Port (1.1 and 1.2) and the new MHL-HDMI standard. This is designed for mobile devices, such as smartphones and tablets. I tested the display using a DisplayPort cable, and like most monitors with such a port the screen defaults to DisplayPort 1.1, limiting it to just 30Hz. Heading into the display's menu revealed the option to enable 1.2 mode, which enables a refresh rate of 60Hz. There's also a couple of USB 3.0 ports for your high-speed external devices.

With its 21:9 aspect ratio, the screen packs a total of 3440 x 1440 pixels. The first thing I noticed when turning on the screen was how bright and even the backlight it. This is thanks to the AH-IPS panel, which helps to overcome the narrow field of view that plagues LCDs. Philips claims users can sit at angles of up to 178 degrees without significant colour shifting, and this is crucial for such a wide display. Older models would exhibit colour shifting at either end simply due to their width even with the user sitting dead centre, but the AH-IPS panel solves this problem entirely.

The display also passed all of our colour, contrast and uniformity tests with flying colours. No pun intended.

However, there is one issue with this display that is of utmost importance to gamers – the pixel response time. Philips clocks this at 14ms, dropping to 5ms when the Smart Response feature is enabled. To test this in action I fired up one of the fastest paced games around – Quake Live. There was a slight amount of motion blur, but nowhere near as bad as expected, solving another issue earlier Ultra-Wide displays had.

With the problems of the past now solved, I'm happy to recommend this screen to those who want a display that will fill their field of view. Just be aware that you'll need some serious GPU horsepower to push around so many pixels. **BENNETT RING** 🇬🇧

- Excellent image quality
- Wide viewing angle
- Bloody huge
- Slight motion blur

VERDICT With this display Philips has resolved the major issues that prevented Ultra-Wide screens from being a gamer's best friend.

9

WIFI

Minitar Wireless AC Repeater

Stretching your WiFi network to the limit

PRICE \$69.95
www.minitar.com

As somebody who has just moved into a house that doesn't have Gigabit Ethernet conveniently piped through the wall cavities, I've had to endure the delights of trying to establish a Wi-Fi network over three floors. With my main router on the middle floor, I've been dealing with a signal strength of about 60% up on the top floor, where my HTPC and office PC are located, and frequent drop outs have become part of my daily routine. Enter this Wi-Fi repeater, which aims to boost the existing Wi-Fi signal, allowing the wireless network to reach further, faster.

Setting up this thing couldn't be simpler. Just plug it into a power point in an area where you're getting about 50% signal strength from your main router, then log in via a Web browser. It can be set up to work as an access point or a repeater. It supports

802.11ac, and I patched it into a network powered by a Linksys EA6500 802.11ac router.

When connecting directly to the 2nd floor router, I measured a download speed of 79.18Mbps and an upload speed of 36.92Mbps, with a ping of 10ms. That's an excellent result considering I'm on just 60% signal strength. However, after connecting to the extender, my download speed dropped to just 40.29Mbps. Upload speed was similarly decreased, down to 19.4Mbps. This was at a range of about 3 metres from the device to my phone though. Moving my phone right next to the extender saw the speed jump through the roof, with a download speed of 86.5Mbps and an upload speed of 23.92Mbps.

So this thing does indeed work... provided your device doesn't stray too far from the repeater. **BENNETT RING** 🇬🇧



- Cheap; easy setup
- Includes Ethernet for a single device
- Performance drops over range
- Device locked up during setup

VERDICT It might be easy to set up and affordable, but this extender's short range could limit its practical applications.

7

HEADPHONES

Plantronics BackBeat PRO

A surprisingly versatile set of cans

PRICE \$299
www.plantronics.com/au/

I own three sets of headphones – my noise cancellers for flying, my gaming headset and a third set that pair with my phone via Bluetooth for listening to music while I'm out and about. The BackBeat PRO offers to replace all three with a single set that can do everything I need, but this convenience comes at a relatively high price.

To connect to your PC, simply use the included headphone jack. To connect to a phone, use Bluetooth or the NFC connection for a fully wireless experience. It's possible to pair the device to two different devices, such as a phone and a tablet, and it will automatically switch between the two when a call comes in. The 24 hour battery life means they'll last for the long haul, which is incredible for a set of wireless headphones. This is even more impressive when you consider they have noise-cancelling as well, and

I found it to be on par with other noise-cancelling headphones.

Controlling the headphones couldn't be easier thanks to the controls that reside on each ear piece. They're nice and big, so there's no fiddling to find the right switch. But what really matters is the sound quality of these headphones. In a word, they're stunning. Whether it's listening to the latest Ghostface Killah album or diving into a round of Battlefield 4, I was amazed at the clarity of the audio on offer. They do tend to be a bit bass heavy, but not at the expense of the high end. I only wish that the microphone worked when connected to a PC – sadly it doesn't.

They mightn't be cheap, but when you consider how versatile these headphones are, it's a price that is easy to justify. **BENNETT RING** 🇬🇧



- So versatile
- Excellent audio quality
- Intuitive controls
- Microphone doesn't work when connected to PC

VERDICT Why own multiple pairs of headphones when this single pair can do it all?

9

LAPTOP

MSI GS30 Shadow with GamingDock

With added GPU goodness.*

PRICE \$2699
www.msi.com



Following hot on the heels of Alienware's Graphics Amplifier comes MSI's version of this GPU-powered shoebox. If you're not familiar with the Graphics Amplifier, it's basically a small box that contains a discrete GPU; simply plug your laptop into it and your laptop is now able to tap into the external GPU's power. The GS30 Shadow offers the same feature – for the price you get an ultra-thin laptop that can plug into the external GamingDock to unleash real gaming performance. But does it actually work?

Let's take a quick look at the specs of the laptop first. It's a tiny thing, weighing just 1.2kg and only 20mm thick. The 13.3 inch screen packs a 1920 x 1080 resolution, which looks crisp and clear due to the small screen size. It's built primarily of plastic, disappointing considering the high price tag of the bundle. Due to the lack of any discrete GPU it's definitely not ready to game on its own, instead using the Iris Pro integrated graphics that are buried inside the intel i7 4870HQ CPU. This is quite a powerful CPU for such a thin laptop, which is probably why fan noise is such an

issue when trying to run games on the integrated GPU. 16GB of memory is standard, along with a 256GB SSD.

Given the beefy processor combined with the healthy amount of system memory and speedy SSD, I expected desktop performance to be snappy and responsive. Sadly MSI has lumbered this laptop with so much bloatware that it chugs, even when it's straight out of the box. I understand that MSI gets a cut from every piece of shovelware it preinstalls on its laptops, but when it causes performance issues and applications to crash, enough is enough. As our benchmarks show, without the GamingDock gaming performance is laughable, which is to be expected given the integrated Intel graphics.

The GamingDock doesn't come with a graphics card, so you'll need to provide that yourself. It'll handle even the fastest GPUs like a Titan, thanks to its integrated power supply, but I used an ASUS GeForce GTX 960. Unlike Alienware's Graphics Amplifier, which connects to the laptop via a long cable, the GS30 must sit on top of the GamingDock to be connected. At the same time, the laptop's display is

disabled, so you have to plug another display into the GamingDock. It's another issue that Alienware's solution doesn't suffer from.

While the performance boost from the GamingDock is admirable, I have to question the quality of the laptop considering the extremely high price. Alienware's competing product comes with a much better overall laptop, at a cheaper price. And when you add the cost of a GPU to the GS30 with GamingDock, it's possible to buy a separate laptop as well as a gaming PC with better specs for the same price. So why bother? **BENNETT RING**

- Interesting concept
- GamingDock delivers gaming performance

- Lacklustre laptop specs for price
- No GPU
- Needs external display

VERDICT MSI's external GPU accelerator and laptop bundle comes a distant second to Alienware's offering.

6

BENCHMARKS

3DMark

Firestrike Results

overall score graphics score

Integrated graphics 1331 1427
GamingDock with GTX 960 6845 7947

Grid Autosport

1080p, Ultra Detail

Min FPS Avg FPS

Integrated graphics 12 13
GamingDock with GTX 960 71 90

*GPU not actually included.

1. Razer Seiren

Price: \$280 • Distributor: Razer

www.razerzone.com

Anyone remotely serious about podcasting and other audio recording needs to be serious about the hardware they use to do it. That three dollar plastic desk mic from your local budget PC store won't cut it.

POWERED UP: Four recording patterns to satisfy almost all recording situations, be it a roundtable podcast, your acoustic guitar stylings, or your barbershop quartet's garage EP.

PLAYED OUT: These types of microphones can actually be a little TOO good sometimes; say, if your recording venue is buffeted by a lot of ambient noise, for example.

2. Swyp Card

Price: \$70 • Distributor: Swyp

www.swypcard.com

It seems like every franchised establishment wants to issue you with a "loyalty" or "rewards" card so they can keep track of what you're buying. If you're okay with this, chances are your wallet/purse is practically bursting with these things.

POWERED UP: Scan in your standard magnetic-stripe cards, rewards, loyalty, credit, debit, and have them all in one card, with the ability to easily switch between them at will. Tethering with your mobile will enable notifications if you leave it behind, and it can still be used even when the phone is out of range.

PLAYED OUT: No NFC yet, so tap/pay won't work.

3. Olympus Air A01

Price: \$400 • Distributor: Olympus

www.olympus.com.au

So you're sad that your smart phone camera doesn't quite capture images at the quality you want, but you'd be even sadder if you had to spend money on a DSLR. This smartphone camera might just be a good middle ground.

POWERED UP: Use your phone as a viewfinder in combination with eight supported apps, and the ability to snap six patterns of photos in a single shot, the settings of which can be "favourited" for in later photos.

PLAYED OUT: If you're going to carry around another device anyway, perhaps a more traditional, non-phone-tethered device is a better option.

4. Toshiba Encrypted Flash Drive

Price: \$130+ • Distributor: Toshiba

www.toshiba.com

Security continues to be an ever more serious business as we blend further into the digital background of life. For those more who are more stone-faced on the subject than the heads at Easter Island, Toshiba is bringing you this.

POWERED UP: Military grade AES 256-bit encrypted flash drive with a number-pad to enter an unlocking PIN. It auto-locks when unplugged, and has a brute force hack-protection system, which will effectively destroy the data on board after 10 failed access attempts.

PLAYED OUT: At over \$100 for the 4GB model (yes, four), this peace of mind doesn't come cheaply.

5. Mota Smart Ring

Price: \$150 • Distributor: Mota

www.mota.com

You check your smartwatch. Nearly time to knock off work. You pack up and walk to the train station. You feel the familiar buzz of your smartphone but can't be bothered taking it out of your pocket, and pushing up your sleeve to see your smartwatch seems like too much effort. You need something easier.

POWERED UP: Like a smart ring that sits there on your finger, vibrating, and notifying you how many emails you have, or what your latest twitter mention is.

PLAYED OUT: Is it possible "smart" devices are getting silly?



01



02



03



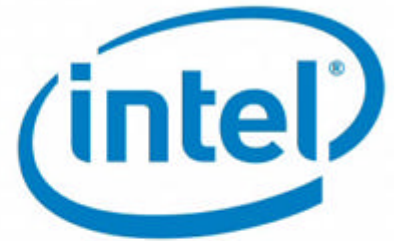
04



05



Welcome to Upgrade Australia



A CLOSER LOOK AT HOW TO COMBINE THE VERSATILITY OF A DESKTOP WITH THE COMPACT SIZE, PORTABILITY AND ENERGY EFFICIENCY OF A NOTEBOOK.

You're chasing a PC that's customisable, which usually means you're shopping for a desktop. But the option to move from study to lounge room, or home to office is also important, which usually means you want a laptop. This month's Upgrade Australia focuses on a solution that's the best of both worlds: a solution that lets you personalise a PC's innards to your specific needs. At the same time, you have the option of fewer cables and greater portability, should the need arise. You'll still need to plug this solution into the wall, but its compact design makes it a cinch to relocate.

FROM WORK TO ENTERTAINMENT

Intel's range of 5th generation Core i3 & Core i5 Next Unit of Computing Mini PCs house personalisation potential in a four-inch square design. You have a choice of a leading-edge Intel CPU, SSD and RAM, alongside any external display, USB devices and external speakers with support for 7.1 surround sound. Connect your NUC to a compatible TV with HDMI to use it as a home-theatre PC. With Linux Mint OS and the XBMC media centre app, you can use infrared support to access a library of locally stored video, music or images on as much as 2TB of internal storage, with a compatible remote.

On top of this, gigabit Ethernet and 802.11ac Wi-Fi mean users can reliably stream content from a local network or cloud storage. Built-in Bluetooth connectivity is there to connect your NUC with compatible speakers or headsets, with range of up to 30 feet. You can



further reduce cable clutter by wirelessly pushing the image from a NUC to a WiDi-compatible display via Intel WiDi technology. This makes it easier to shift your NUC from lounge-room media hub to study-room work computer. On top of this, Intel HD Graphics 5500 and 6000 Graphics means a NUC is ready to connect to 4K Ultra HD displays.

BUILT TO WORK WITH YOU

A Core i5 processor-powered VPro NUC offers even greater versatility, stability and manageability. This 5th generation Intel CPU provides the necessary horsepower to streamline resource-intensive tasks, with Intel Turbo Boost Technology 2.0 for automated performance boosts. For instance, record and mix high-quality audio content at the office, and bring the NUC home to finalise at home. Additionally, the NUC is capable of editing and rendering HD videos in a similar respect.

Dual Mini-DisplayPort options on the

back of the NUC allows triple-display 4K support for larger viewing efficiency, with the option to add Wi-Fi and WiDi. The 5th generation NUCs also include a charging-capable USB port that's ideal for quickly charging smartphones and tablets.

If mobility isn't a prerequisite, you can also create your own fixed-screen All-in-One desktop solution by way of included Video Electronics Standards Association (VESA) bracket.

VERSATILE GAMING PLATFORM

With a Core i5 processor inside a NUC, gamers can also take advantage of automated performance improvements by way of Intel Turbo Boost and games optimised for Intel Graphics. Intel HD Graphics 6000 has the power to handle casual, indie and mainstream games on a compatible TV, 4K display or across multiple HD monitors. Better yet, it's DirectX 12 ready. The new Intel Graphics offer enhanced gaming performance and video editing conversion performance with Quick Sync (over previous generation NUCs).

Combine an M.2 SSD with Intel Rapid Start Technology to load games faster and instantly resume where you left off. All of your gaming peripherals connect via Bluetooth or USB (3x USB 3.0 and 1x USB 2.0), which means there's room for keyboard, mouse, headset, steering wheel, gamepad or joystick. The gigabit Ethernet port equates to fast streaming of high-end games from a dedicated desktop to your NUC via Steam's Big Picture Mode. On top of this, the compact design makes it easier to transport between rooms or to LAN parties.

For more information, visit intel.com/nuc





RADEON™ is Gaming. See why at amd.com/R9

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The competition
is green with envy.

**AMD RADEON™ R9 285
GRAPHICS CARD**

*Get red for the performance
that demands respect.*





MENAGERIE

With great power comes great something something.

WITH LOVE

BUDGET

The perfect entry-level gaming PC

CPU

AMD FX-4300 4 Core Black Edition

\$118 www.amd.com
We're sticking with AMD's budget beauty.



MOBO

ASRock 980DE3/U3S3 AM3+

\$69 www.asrock.com.au
Our CPU needs a new ASRock home.



RAM

GeIL 8GB Kit DDR3 Evo Veloce C9 1600MHz

\$85 www.geil.com.tw
In with the cheapest we can find



VIDEO

Sapphire Radeon R9 280X

\$325 www.sapphiretech.com
Enjoy 1080p performance with all the options



POWER

Cooler Master Thunder 500W

\$66 www.coolermaster.com
The budget beast doesn't need a lot of juice



SOUND

Sennheiser HD201 + ASUS Xonar DG

\$56 www.sennheiser.com
Headphones plus soundcard - yes!



OPTICAL

Lite-on DVD-RW

\$21 www.us.liteonit.com
We'd happily retire the drive, but some of you guys still believe in physical media.



STORAGE

Toshiba DT01ACA050 500GB HDD

\$55 www.toshiba.com.au
Half a Terabyte should handle everything.



DISPLAY

Samsung 24" S24D300H

\$165 www.samsung.com
Crystal clear 1920 x 1080 res gaming



CASE

BitFenix Shinobi

\$71 www.bitfenix.com
Nice for the price. This is the little brother of the case used in our Performance build.



KEYBOARD

Tt eSPORTS Challenger

\$45 www.thermaltake.com.au
Built for PC gamers. Macros, shortcuts, the lot.



MOUSE

Gigabyte M6900

\$22 www.gigabyte.com.au
A sensor resolution of 3200DPI will make your headshots count.



TOTAL - \$1,098

PERFORMANCE

Most of the bells and whistles, without breaking the bank

CPU

Intel 4th Generation Core i5-4670K + Cooler Master Hyper 612 PWM

\$263 + \$52 www.intel.com



MOBO

ASRock Z97M Anniversary

\$119 www.asrock.com
Around half the price of Z97 boards.



RAM

GeIL 8GB Kit DDR3 Evo Veloce C9 1600MHz

\$85 www.geil.com.tw
In with the cheapest we can find



VIDEO

Galaxy GTX970-4GD5

\$435 www.galaxytechus.com
NVIDIA's mid-range card is perfect



POWER

Corsair VS650

\$81 www.corsair.com
This affordable PSU delivers a clean and reliable source of energy.



SOUND

Audio Technica ATH-A500X

w/ASUS Xonar DG \$186 www.audio-technica.com



OPTICAL

Lite-on DVD-RW

\$21 www.us.liteonit.com
This is the one bit of kit that stays the same between most of our machines.



STORAGE

W.D. Caviar Black 1TB + Samsung 850 EVO 250GB

\$95 + \$175 www.wdc.com/ www.samsung.com.au



DISPLAY

BenQ XL2411T

\$369 www.benq.com.au
BenQ's 24-inch not only looks great, it'll also save your eyesight with a 144Hz refresh rate.



CASE

Fractal Design Define R5

\$150 www.fractal-design.com
Our new favourite mid-tower.



KEYBOARD

Logitech G710+

\$139 www.thermaltake.com.au
Logi's new mechanical board is one for them to beat.



MOUSE

Logitech G502 Proteus

\$55 www.logitech.com
Deadly accurate and super comfortable.



TOTAL - \$2,225

PREMIUM

Crank everything to Ultra, including your credit card limit

CPU

Intel 4th Generation Core i7-4790K + Corsair H110 Water Cooling Kit

\$425 + \$169 www.intel.com



MOBO

ASUS Maximus VII Ranger

\$229 www.asus.com.au
One of our favourite Z97 boards



RAM

GeIL 8GB Kit DDR3 Evo Veloce C9 1600MHz

\$85 www.geil.com.tw
In with the cheapest we can find



VIDEO

2 X Gigabyte GV-N980WF30C-4GD GeForce GTX 980 4GB

\$1478 www.gigabyte.com.au



POWER

Corsair HX1000i

\$289 www.corsair.com
A high end PSU to ensure stable overlocks.



SOUND

Audio Technica ATH-ADG1 headphones

\$279 audio-technica.com
We've ditched the soundcard



OPTICAL

Pioneer Optical Disc Drive (ODD) Internal Blu-ray Combo Drive

\$59 www.pioneer.com.au



STORAGE

W.D. Caviar Black 1TB + Samsung SSD 850 EVO 500GB

\$100 + \$318 www.wdc.com/ www.samsung.com.au



DISPLAY

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STORAGE

2 x Samsung SSD 850 EVO 1TB, 3 x WD 1TB Velociraptor

\$1060 + \$717

www.wdc.com

www.samsung.com



RAM

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\$352 www.corsair.com

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DISPLAY

Epson TW9200W \$3800

www.epson.com.au

Beautiful 1920 x 1080 gaming. Unfortunately you won't be able to do 3D gaming at anything higher than 720p due to the limitations of HDMI 1.4.



VIDEO

3 x Asus STRIX Geforce GTX 980 4GB

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CASE

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\$329 www.silverstone.com

1500W should be plenty for the three GPUs running alongside an overclocked CPU, as well as the storage within.



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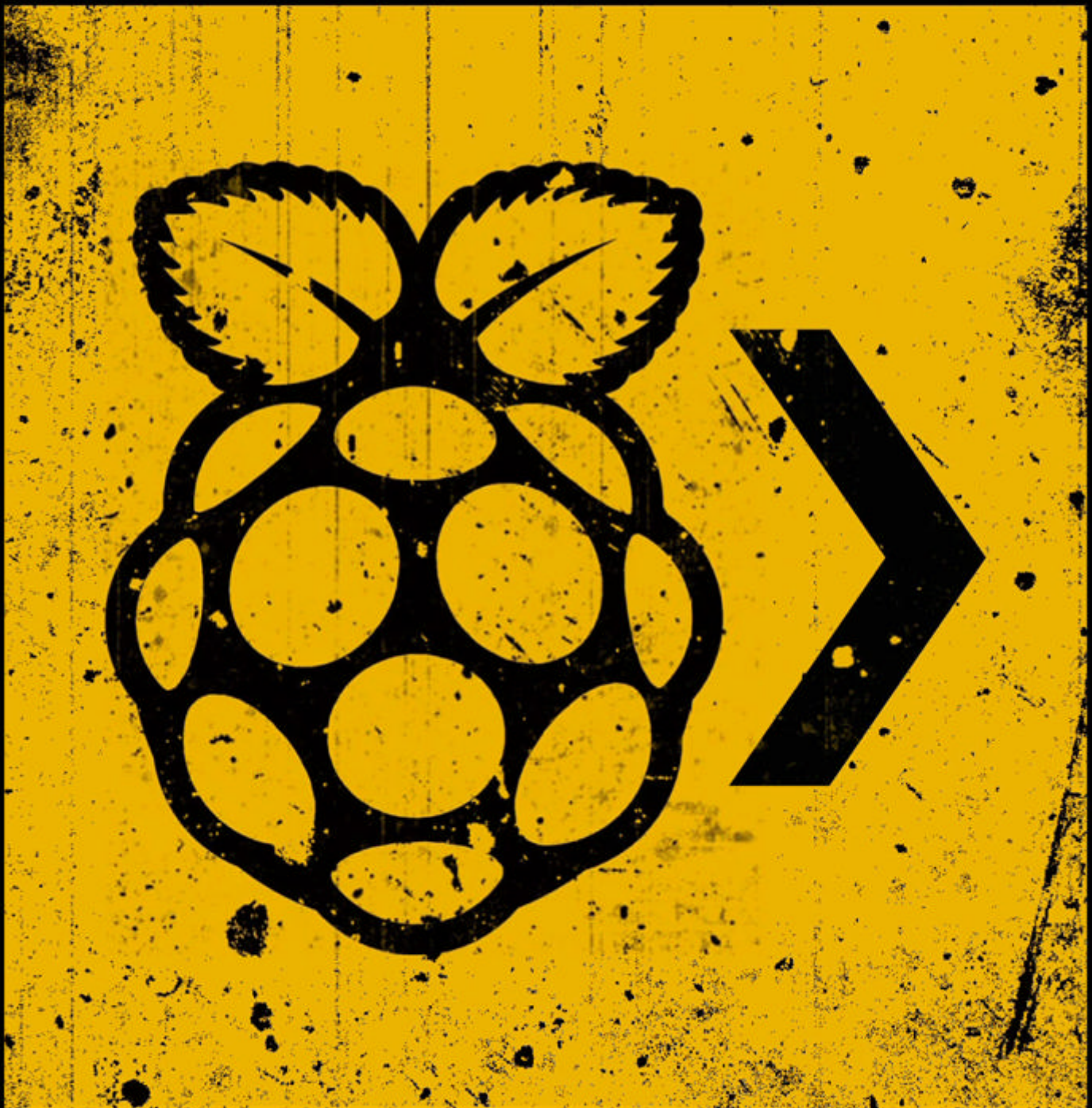
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RASPBERRY PLEX

Want to stream your media to all your devices? **ASHLEY MCKINNON** blows a Raspberry (Pi)



The Raspberry Pi is a great little device which is capable of doing many cool things. One of those is acting as a remote streamer for playing your media files. Through the use of RasPLEX, you can connect a Raspberry Pi to any television or monitor and play your media from your PLEX server. While it may not be as outwardly feature rich as say an Apple TV, its low cost point and flexibility make the Raspberry Pi a great project platform on which to build.

To use RasPLEX, you will first need a PLEX server to connect to. PLEX is a freely available media server and can be downloaded and installed onto your desktop system from <https://plex.tv>. It's simple to setup and really is a "follow the bouncing ball" affair.

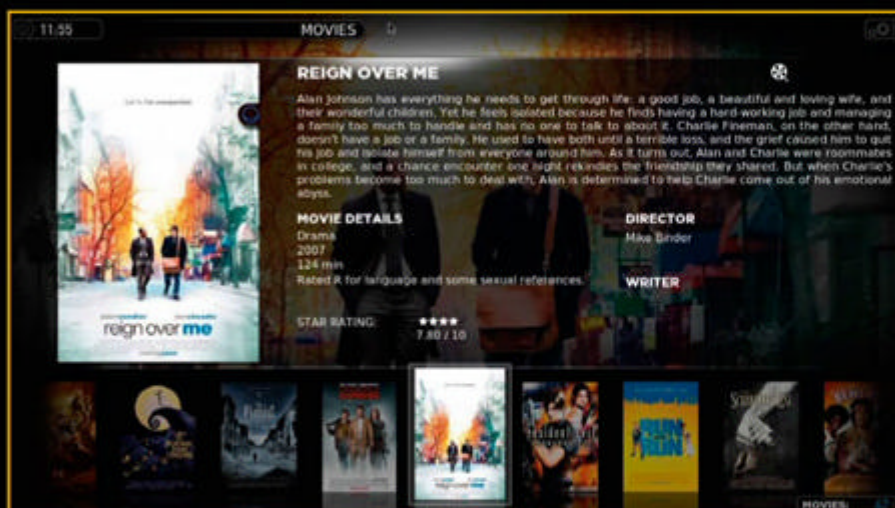
Download PLEX and run the installer, point PLEX at your media files and let it run. It sets itself up as a server announcing itself to your network. You can connect to your PLEX server from any computer or device on your network. Connection to PLEX can be done from either a web browser, or as we are setting up here – a PLEX client (there are also PLEX clients available for IOS and Android). Once you have your PLEX server up and running, it is now time to turn your attention to your Raspberry Pi.

INSTALLING THE SOFTWARE

RasPLEX is a software bundle built on top of a version of Linux called OpenELEC, which will enable your Raspberry Pi to run as a PLEX client, streaming media from your PLEX server. The beauty of the Raspberry Pi running a PLEX client is that it's a very small device, and can be powered directly from a USB port – which most modern televisions have.

To get RasPLEX, simply visit their homepage at www.rasplex.com, click on the Get RasPLEX button and select your OS version for the installer. Items needed for this project include: a Raspberry Pi (either version 1 or 2), an SD Card (at least 2GB), USB Keyboard, HDMI cable and an Ethernet connection (or Raspberry Pi Wifi adapter).

When you run the installer, you will need to have the SD card attached to your desktop system to copy all the necessary install files onto – the Raspberry Pi itself runs from an SD Card. The installer is simple enough to use, simply choose your version of Raspberry Pi, select which version of RasPlex you want to install (select the latest one available – at time of writing it is 0.5.1), then choose the



The Plex interface shows your content, making streaming media from your PC a breeze.

drive your SD Card is attached to. You then be asked to download the installer image file, so select a location and save it. After the image has downloaded click on the Write SD Card button and it will erase the SD card and install all necessary files.

Once the installer tells you it's finished remove the SD Card and put into your Raspberry Pi. Connect to a TV or Monitor, attach a network cable and keyboard then power it on.

Now the boot up sequence from an SD Card isn't quite the same as an SSD drive so sit back, relax and be patient while it takes a couple of minutes to get started.

After the initial bootup sequence has finished, you will be presented with the RasPLEX setup screen. Simply hit Return on your keyboard to select English as your preferred language and continue.

If you have a Wifi connection on your Raspberry Pi then the next screen will ask you to join your Wifi network – otherwise it will show you your wired network and you can just continue and be taken to the Calibrate Screen window. Calibrating the screen really isn't necessary as RasPLEX does a good job

of auto detection so just press Enter to continue.

Serious users of PLEX may have a MyPlex pass, which on the next screen will ask you to log in.

If you don't, simply press Enter to continue.

The next screen is important as it allows you to setup precaching. What precaching does is bring down all the images and metadata from your PLEX server and store them locally – which improves the performance of RasPLEX. If you choose to run precaching, you will be asked to select your PLEX server, then hit OK to start. It is recommended you do this option as it really

does speed things along. Once done, hit Next to move on. Be warned though - precaching can take some time – depending on the size of the library on your PLEX server (My PLEX server runs on my 12TB NAS full of media files and the precaching took around 15 minutes to run). At this stage it may look like the RasPLEX installation has frozen but it is working in the background – just give it some time to do its thing.

And that's it, the setup is done. You should now be taken to your PLEX home screen. Navigation of the PLEX screen is easily done using the arrow keys on your keyboard.

SETUP AND STREAMING

A few things you might want to do before you start watching your media is to go in and setup some of the preferences for PLEX. On the main screen, press the left arrow on your keyboard and then use the up or down arrows to select preferences. Under the Third option, System, Advanced, change your video resolution to whatever your TV or Monitor is capable of. Also, if you are planning on running the system through an AV receiver, under Audio Output you can enable Dolby Digital and DTS capabilities.

You can further enhance your RasPLEX experience by adding some extras to your Raspberry Pi.

Several Wifi options are available for the Raspberry Pi. One of the best available is the AusPi adapter which supports 802.11 B/G/N and has a large built in antenna for good reception.

Another option is to use an FLIRC adapter which allows you to program any remote control to work with RasPLEX. It's a USB dongle that you first attach to your PC to program with your selected remote, then plug into your Raspberry Pi to use. 📺

“Be warned though
- precaching can take
some time”

PC PowerPlay COMPS

Welcome to the PCPP competitions page! With the office positively overflowing in PC gaming goodies, it's become so difficult to do our ridiculously awesome jobs that we decided to pass the savings onto you. And by savings, we mean free stuff. Games, collectibles, swag, and all kinds of media that screams PC gaming. Or perhaps those are the screams of the intern trapped under the boxes of giveaways. Only one way to save them:

Head to **www.pcpowerplay.com.au** to enter!

To find the competitions, simply mouse over the "Community" tab in the main menu at the top of the homepage, and click on "Competitions". Click through to each individual competition page, fill out the form (be sure to agree to the terms and conditions) and you'll be in the running to win! Keep an eye out for this page in future issues of PCPP, as we roll out new competitions every month!

WIN

10

BLU-RAYS
TO WIN!



Rurouni Kenshin: Kyoto Inferno

The sequel to the excellent 2012 film Rurouni Kenshin (itself based on the Samurai X anime) sees the eponymous reformed assassin must stop a band of killers who can throw Japan back into a state of civil war.

TO ENTER:

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10

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In 25 words or less, answer the following question:

▶ **What is the greatest hard SF film of all time?**

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MA/PC238

A FANTASTIC ATTRACTION

JOSHUA LUNDBERG believes in magic

Humanity has a long history of telling stories of the paranormal, the bizarre, the unthinkable and the fantastic. It is no surprise that once interactive methods of engagement with stories were available, that fantasy realms became a popular virtual setting.

Certainly, you can say table top and card games have an immense influence on the fantasy video games that arose, but even without them I find it hard to believe fantasy games wouldn't have occurred on their own; people love fantasy.

Fantasy games are, when made well, equally as daunting, dangerous and exciting as the worlds that inspired them; worlds that have only existed in the minds, on the page and on the screen before. It is in these worlds, even as characters with humble or even abysmal beginnings, that people with true skill can become respected, even loved.

It's a wonderful thing to give people. Certainly, for some it can become a negative distraction from life if playing errs on the side of addiction, but for most entering the lands of orcs, giants, mammoths, dragons, magic, steel and bow, is an embracing, lovable experience.

Fantasy is interesting in that it immediately raises the questions of universes. What is this place? Who are the people? Are

there only humans? Is it earth? What is the technology like? Is there magic?

You can apply fantasy to most settings, the most famous non-traditional being Star Wars, which is not a science fiction film, but rather a space fantasy and opera.

What we know of Star Wars we can apply to any fantasy world: there are rules, there are sides, there is a universe that these character live in. And it isn't our own.

This is where gaming becomes interesting. The concept of the lived-in universe.

Popular in film, particularly since the release of Star Wars, the concept of the lived-in universe has spread like wildfire in film. Peter Jackson references it as a huge inspiration for the look in his Lord of the Rings trilogy.

The lived-in universe has grit, decay, imperfections. It gets dusty and, under no circumstances, looks as though it was freshly constructed - unless, of course, it was.

In videogames this approach to world design delivers a place rendered believable through the magic of art and level design, where people go about their lives as we do here on earth.

And it's just waiting for us to come adventuring through it.

In the days of lower resolution textures, say fifteen years ago (two for console gamers, amirite??), so much of what we drew from fantasy settings was in our imagination. Excellent art design helped, and it's part of why isometric and top down became so popular with fantasy games: with isometric and top down designs you can not only establish gameplay mechanics that work well in the fantasy settings, but also depict a vast, gritty world without having to go very far beyond two dimensional elements. In some cases, not at all.

This is how the epic fantasy tales of Diablo I & II were told, among some notable others.

And it is with the coming generation of videogames that I truly think the believability and immersion of fantasy settings will become

“Fantasy is becoming more widely accepted, more mainstream”

unparalleled. And for newcomers like me, that immersion will help.

Fantasy is becoming more widely accepted, more mainstream. When I was young I had little to no interest in fantasy worlds, especially in videogames. I've never been into magic (just The Force), and aside from a few franchises most lore tended to leave me yawning.

But eventually I began to appreciate fantasy worlds, and what I have always loved is being a warrior. It may be predictable. It may be boring so some. But I love to wield a sword in one hand and a shield in the other. I long to stride clad in armour, through the world painstakingly developed for me, ready clash with my enemies. And I'm sure many millions of others feel the same way.



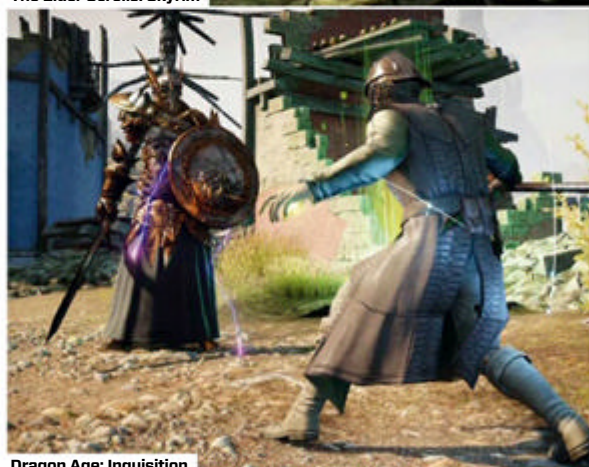
Diablo III





World of Warcraft



The Elder Scrolls: Skyrim



Dragon Age: Inquisition



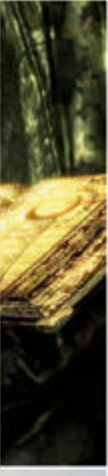
One brilliance of fantasy worlds is that you can't ever have that annoying, pessimistic sod who always goes, "that's not how that happens", to which you must respond "it's a game, jackass".

No one has ever been attacked by a dragon or fired balls of magic coolness from their palms. No one has ever tossed a d... hmm. No one has ever battled orcs, nor slain a demon.

And so, as long as the textures are rich, the world alive and the impact of the player on the world feels natural, developers can create any kind of game about any world they like. More convincingly, that is, than the magnificent ones that have come and gone that really did require a decent imagination to close the gap.


As technology improved, gameplay saw changes and refinements. In 2011 Skyrim was almost shockingly successful, because it breached the traditional fantasy audience into the mainstream. Certainly, it required the sacrifice of some gameplay elements, but I always felt it streamlined something great, but tedious, into something incredibly fun.

With Oblivion always feeling lifeless to me, I very much enjoyed entering the world of Skyrim and exploring endlessly.



It was a reminder that it is not the universes that exclude players, but the gameplay mechanics and storytelling devices. A living, breathing world won't go beyond obscurity if the gameplay isn't accessible. And maybe that's fine; I play plenty of games with absurd learning curves.

As the breadth of what is possible in videogames grows - an evolution measured partly in immersion, graphics, narrative, characterisation and gameplay - the possibilities of fantasy settings evolve. It is very possible that the potential of interactive fantasy settings will one day exceed the capacities of traditional mediums and deliver players of all calibres into the shoes of characters whose feet walk the very ground cave trolls tread.



We now know the worlds populated with elves and orcs aren't just for the sub cultures, but for everyone once again. Our videogames have become the tales once told around fires. They've become the stories told around the water cooler. Around the poker table. Around the bar.

And for the first time in human history one can say they were attacked by a dragon, cast magic from the palms of their hands and slain demons who annihilate the world in the name of a dark lord and have it be the truth. 🏰



FRIDAY NIGHT FIREFIGHT

DANIEL WILKS is Chippin' In and will Never Fade Away

Since its inception in 2002, developer CD Projekt Red has been about one thing - bringing Andrzej Sapkowski's *Witcher* series to life. Come May, however, the driving force for the developer is finished, with *The Witcher 3: Wild Hunt* hitting shelves and completing the story first started on PC in 2007. Eight years working on the same property is a long time, and the *Witcher* stories have an even longer history, with the first being published in 1992. CD Projekt Red's next endeavour, however, have roots that extend even further.

In 1988, R. Talsorian Games published a boxed set of a pen and paper RPG created by Mike Pondsmith. *Cyberpunk 2013*, or just plain old *Cyberpunk* as it was more widely known introduced the world to the dark corporate future (of two years ago) in which heroes living on the fringes of society fight for freedom, rights, individuality and the credits needed to support such a lifestyle. Based in part on books by authors such as William Gibson, Bruce Sterling, Rudy Rucker and Walter Jon Williams, *Cyberpunk* (the game) formalised and popularised many of the *Cyberpunk* (literary movement) concepts first introduced by the "Mirrorshades" group of authors..

Despite the popularity of the original *Cyberpunk* boxed set, the game didn't earn its status as one of the seminal RPGs until 1990 and the release of the second edition, *Cyberpunk 2020*. Shifting the setting seven years after the original game, *Cyberpunk 2020* brought to life the arcology of Night City, a grim, dark city ruled by a corporate oligarchy and constantly teetering on the brink of all out corporate war - the kind with hostile takeovers that include armies and guns, not just shareholder meetings. Unlike other RPGs of the time, the emphasis of *Cyberpunk* was interpersonal relationships and navigating the uncertainty of a life lived on the edge of legality rather than combat. Combat featured, definitely, but it emphasised lethality more than it did spectacular action, making it a thing to be avoided if possible.

The character classes available hinted at this character rather than combat approach, as, with few exceptions, the classes didn't fall into the more typical RPG archetypes.

Partially this is because of the unique special ability afforded to each class and partially it was because of the actual nature of the classes. Solos, Med-Techs and

a *Cyberpunk* sourcebook - have a special skill called Family that allowed them to have a vast network of contact and affiliates that could be called upon for help or guidance.

This focus on interpersonal relationships could be the reason that until now, *Cyberpunk* was never turned into a computer RPG at the height of its popularity. At the time, even the most thoughtful of PC RPGs were focussed mainly on combat, loot and exploration rather than brokering deals and doing what it takes to survive. *Shadowrun*, a pen and paper RPG series first published in 1989 took the corporate future of cyberpunk and merged it with fantasy and overt action, making it much more easily transposed to a CRPG format.

Seemingly in response to *Shadowrun*, Mike Pondsmith created the alternate *Cyberpunk* future spin-off RPG, *Cybergeneration* in 1993. In it, an incident known as the "Fox Run" resulted in a weaponised nano-virus called the "Carbon Plague" being released. Adults who contracted the plague died agonising deaths as the nano-virus rewrote their generic code, but children and teenagers - those whose bodies were still in a state of flux - were altered and gifted with powers. Popular enough to deserve a second edition in 1995, *Cybergeneration* still couldn't achieve the cultural cache of either *Cyberpunk 2020* or *Shadowrun* and has since become little more than a blip on the radar.

Now, 27 years after *Cyberpunk* was first published, the venerable RPG is finally being brought to the PC. Little is known about

the project as yet aside from the fact that Mike Pondsmith is not only working with CD Projekt Red to bring his dark future to life. Perhaps coinciding with the future release of *Cyberpunk 2077*, Pondsmith is also working on a new edition of the pen and paper RPG that is set to "evolve the genre". Taking a leaf out of Blizzard's book, CD Projekt Red have stated that *Cyberpunk 2077* will be released "when it's finished". Given the fact that the game was first announced in May of 2012, when that will be is anybody's guess. 🇬🇧



“Cyberpunk 2020 brought to life the arcology of Night City”

Netrunners in part adhere to more common RPG archetypes - warrior, cleric and thief/mage respectively - but the others fell far outside the normal guidelines. Media, for example, are reporters willing to go that extra mile to get a story. Their class ability is Credibility, a trait that makes people more likely to believe what they say. Nomads - gypsies and couriers roughly based around *Cowboy*, the hero of Walter Jon Williams' 1986 novel *Hardwired*, a work that also served as both the inspiration and title of

HITTING THE FAN.

DANIEL WILKS loves the fans but fears the fanaticism

Fans are strange beasts. Sometimes fans are a loose conglomerate of people who like one thing, but sometimes that shared passion bonds fans together into some kind of super-organism that acts as one and has cells that act to protect the larger body. In many ways, February was a month that was defined by fans, fan backlash and the mishandling of fans by people who should know better. There were three fan interactions that really stood out to me as being the defining moments of the month, each illustrating a different aspect of fandom.

To start with have the debacle surrounding Peter Molyneux's *Godus*. I won't go over all the details as Ben Mansill has covered most of that ground in his column but instead focus on what I think Molyneux has missed. In interviews, especially the rather scathing one with Rock Paper Shotgun, Molyneux has stated that he no longer has a name in gaming and that, in essence, nobody knows who he is anymore. That is patently not the case as evidenced by the support for his Kickstarter campaign and the number of people that mindlessly tapped away at the Curiosity cube. The whole process, from start until now has been entirely predicated on Peter Molyneux's gaming cachet and his large number of fans.

Curiosity revolved around Molyneux's reputation, and when it was finally unlocked by Bryan Henderson it was Peter himself who appeared in a YouTube video to explain the purpose of the game and what the effects the game would have on the winner. It was an experiment and a crowd funding campaign based, if not exclusively then extremely strongly, on an existing fan base. Why else bill *Godus* as "a delightful reinvention of the god game from 22Cans and Peter Molyneux, who created the genre"? That one line is clearly calling to fans of both the developer himself and the game that arguably made him the high profile developer he is today.

Cut to now and the videos of apology, the interviews full of mea culpas and recriminations and the lack of contact or interaction with Henderson have turned

the developer's enduring fan base against him. The whole Curiosity experiment and then crowd sourcing the funding for the development of *Godus* both relied on fan support and gave ample opportunity for the creation of a strong new fan base through interaction and community development. Curiosity gave them the perfect leg in, with a member of the public becoming a key "member" of the team. By sidelining and ignoring Henderson, Molyneux and 22Cans essentially placed themselves apart from the community that they needed to foster for the game to thrive.

In his interview with Rock Paper Shotgun, Molyneux also claimed on numerous occasions that the interviewer John Walker was trying to run him out of the games business. Sure, the interview did start off somewhat antagonistic but given Molyneux's history of promising

far more than he ever delivered, the idea of him being a pathological liar (in this definition someone who lies without being aware of it) doesn't seem

“I don't want to get into the whole GamerGate/SJW diatribe”

that inappropriate. Whatever the case, Walker revealed himself to be a fan of a number of Molyneux's games. What Peter took to be someone who had it in for him appears to the reader to be a disappointed fan rather than a hate-monger.

The second fan incident is almost entirely the opposite of Molyneux's problem – fans coming to the strident defence of an artist rather than distancing themselves from him. I don't want to get into the whole GamerGate/SJW diatribe that has formed around the issue of Adam Baldwin and *Supanova* but instead focus on what has happened between two groups of dedicated fans – those of the event and those of Baldwin himself. Long story short, Adam Baldwin, a pop-culture icon thanks to his portrayal of Jayne Cobb in the cult TV series, *Firefly*, has made a less stellar name for himself over the past couple of years for various reasons, including the coining of the term GamerGate, his tacit approval of doxxing, comparing same sex marriage to incest and the like.

Upon learning that Baldwin would be at *Supanova*, a number of people tried



Godus



Adam Baldwin



Eve Beauregard



Star Citizen

to have his invite rescinded as they felt that the kind of supporters that Baldwin may attract would make the event less inclusive and would leave some of them feeling unsafe. This is obviously a very cursory view of the argument, but nothing deeper is really needed with what is to come. Supanova decided to let the invite stand, arguing that a person's politics and work could be separated, a move that angered a number of Supanova fans, leading to some high profile displays and cosplayers planning to boycott the event.

At a base level, both sides of the argument are correct. Baldwin may have shown himself to be a right wing ideologue and twitter bully through social media, but that doesn't detract from the fact that he embodied a beloved character. Likewise, those who organised the original petition trying to remove Baldwin from the event or planning on boycotting Supanova are correct in saying that the inclusion of someone who has been outspokenly bigoted on some topics and supports/has the support of GamerGate may cause the event to be less welcoming and inclusive than it has been in previous years and could draw a crowd that would leave some attendees feeling less safe than they would like.

The response from fans on both sides is awkward. On the one hand you have people, somewhat understandably, trying to exclude someone from an event in the name of inclusiveness, and on the other you have a fan base living down to expectation whilst trying to defend Baldwin. Whilst trying to justify Baldwin's inclusion at Supanova, a number of have been harassed for speaking out by Baldwin's supporters. According to prominent Australian cosplayer Eve Beauregard, one of the people boycotting the event, "Countless people have been threatened, harassed and targeted in the name of the movement which Adam Baldwin is the celebrity face of, many simply for voicing an opposing view. To ask your attendees to publicly speak out against GamerGate is to ask them to make targets of themselves. This quickly became apparent as several community members were doxxed for speaking about why they disagreed with having Baldwin as a guest." By behaving in such a way in defence of Baldwin's

inclusion in the event, some fans have made people's fears of not feeling safe at Supanova a reality.

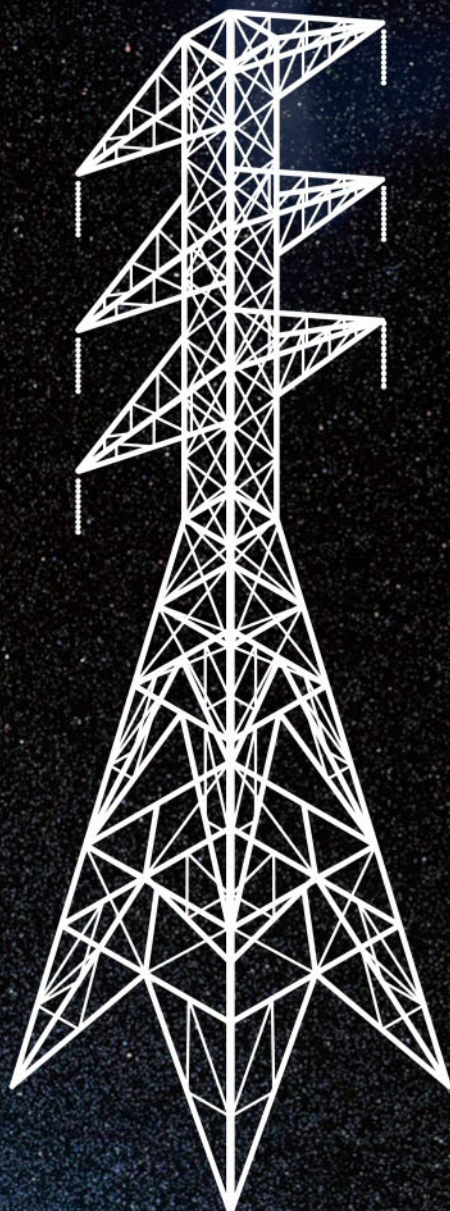
The final problem is one I'm responsible for. In our Simulator Special we made a joke in our review of Elite Dangerous, referring to Star Citizen as "Scam Citizen" and saying that it would be released in 2047. The joke was made in reference to the huge amount of money that had been accrued by Cloud Imperium Games and the feature creep that has resulted from the budget, as well as the fact that there have been multiple articles over the past 12 months questioning the validity of the project. Although I didn't write the words, as editor the buck stops with me. I was initially going to put inverted commas around scam, but decided against it, feeling that people would get the joke. I was wrong. The Star Citizen fan base was not happy with us to say the least.

When you look at Star Citizen you can understand why the fans take offense. There have been a number of clickbait articles about the game, but I think that the desire to leap to the defence of the game is built into the funding model. The game is crowd-funded, with a huge number of people paying not insubstantial amounts of money to buy into a game that is not yet complete, with only a dogfighting module and the ability to walk around and through your ships currently available. The fans have a lot invested, both monetarily and emotionally in the game, and any hint of disparagement is not only a knock at the game but those who have funded and anticipate the game as a whole. I misread that and was soundly slapped. That said, calling for someone to be fired over a few words meant in jest is an overreaction.

As fans ourselves we sometimes fall into these same traps – disappointing our base or lashing out at anyone we perceive as an existential threat to something we love. Passion can fill you with an almost unlimited fire that can drive your life and loves. You just need to be careful not to burn yourself or others. Fandom can bring your perspective down to a laser focus making you blind to a bigger picture. Every fan should love what they love but should also attempt to take a step back and broaden their view. **PC**



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